

Mobile Abattoir Plan for St. Thomas/St. John Scrapped; Dept. of Agriculture Now Pursuing Facility Renovation

Dept. of Agriculture representatives told lawmakers funding never materialized for the \$900K mobile unit. VIDA is now working with Public Works to renovate the existing facility and restore slaughter services to the district.

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When the Department of Agriculture (VIDA) appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance as part of budgetary activities in July 2024, Commissioner Louis Petersen apprised lawmakers of a [plan to purchase a mobile abattoir](#) to serve the St. Thomas/St. John district. The commissioner returned to the Senate on Wednesday to advise them that “the funding for this plan has not materialized,” and thus the district remains without the needed facility.

Last year, Mr. Petersen told lawmakers that the mobile unit would cost \$900,000, paid for with funds from the American Rescue Plan Act. At the time, the funds were being vetted. “I remain confident that at the end of the process, we’ll be funded,” said Mr. Petersen in his 2024 testimony. The temporary solution for St. Thomas/St. John was necessary, as the district had gone without a slaughterhouse since the 2017 hurricanes.

On Wednesday, Mr. Petersen explained to lawmakers on the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture that VIDA has had to recalibrate. “Our revised plan therefore involves the renovation of the existing facility,” he said. Renovation was already on the books in 2024 but was described as a “long-term initiative.” With plans for the mobile abattoir now scrapped, VIDA is now “actively working with the Department of Public Works to develop a scope of work and cost for the renovation project.” New equipment will also need to be purchased and the appropriate staff hired.

“Some structural work has already been done by an engineer,” Mr. Petersen told Senator Avery Lewis, who was concerned with timelines. “I am hoping and looking forward to beginning the renovations within the next few months, but it depends upon the engineer’s scope of work, getting that cost and then putting it to bid.”

The St. Thomas/St. John district is “desperately in need of an operational abattoir,” Mr. Petersen said, as livestock farmers are forced to travel to St. Croix at VIDA’s expense. Complicating matters even further, no vessels currently offer that direct service, the commissioner advised.

Even on St. Croix, slaughterhouse services have been suspended several times due to the shuttering of the abattoir. The department is steadily working to replace equipment at the facility, Mr. Petersen said. The abattoir, reopened shortly after the recently concluded Agrifest, boasted a repaired ramping station, a new steam boiler, and a new ARPA-funded air curtain. “With the support of the Office of the Governor and OMB, we are currently procuring and replacing even more equipment,” testified Mr. Petersen.

The equipment list includes a ventilation system for the “protection” of staff, a band saw, and a dehairing machine. “Once these items are acquired and installed, this will practically complete our initiative to renew the St. Croix abattoir with all updated equipment and operating systems,” the commissioner noted. VIDA intends to hire a maintenance engineer “who will be responsible for the routine maintenance and upkeep of all components of the abattoir, thereby preventing or even reducing future extended closures.” A suitable candidate has already been identified. An additional butcher will also join the team.

“Let’s make sure that that area is secured,” advised Sen. Lewis, recalling how new kitchen equipment [mysteriously disappeared](#) from the Eulalie Rivera K-8 School.

While VIDA’s plans to purchase a mobile abattoir have been put out to pasture, another entity may have the opportunity to step in and fill that gap. In her testimony, Yvette Brown of Sejah Farms and Island Food Security Inc. informed the committee that a delegation of local farmers recently attended the Black Belt Meat Summit. There, they were exposed to “hands-on experience with mobile meat processing technology.” Further, their attendance has positioned Island Food Security Inc. members “to pursue the acquisition of a mobile abattoir.” Whether the coalition will pursue that acquisition, and potential timelines for getting it into operation, were not discussed.