

Cost of "99 Steps" Restoration Rises From \$115K to \$725K as PFA Approves Budget Increase

The V.I. Public Finance Authority raised the project cap to \$725,000 after approving change orders and sewer line upgrades. Originally budgeted at just under \$115,000, the project's cost ballooned due to design changes and unforeseen infrastructure needs.

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Store Taerne Gade, widely known as 99 steps in St. Thomas, USVI.

On Wednesday, the V.I. Public Finance Authority held their regular meeting, and discussed a request to increase the budget for the repair of Store Taerne Gade, widely known as 99 Steps.

Work began on the project last December, with a scheduled completion date of April 2025. Initial estimates from the Department of Public Works were that renovations and repairs would cost just

under \$115,000. Eventually, with only one bid on the table, the PFA approved a contract with Custom Builders for a maximum of \$275,000 altogether.

The contractor is now proposing several change orders to address issues including revised quantities of materials, changes to the type of lighting to be installed, correcting client error, and making changes recommended by the State Historic Preservation Commission. Altogether, the changes would cost just over \$134,000, bringing the total estimated cost above \$409,000.

“Board members, this is proof of the age old adage ‘no good deed goes unpunished,’” PFA chair Governor Albert Bryan Jr. chuckled wryly. “This project started like, \$100,000 to fix the stairs and it just keeps going.”

He noted that there was an additional consideration of approximately \$300,000 which would be needed to replace the sewer line in the area. “If we don't, it'll have to be dug up again during the renovation of all our entire sewer system,” Governor Bryan warned. “We were trying to find and identify some funds from Waste Management or somewhere else to do this project.”

The Waste Management Authority, however, is “still looking to see how they might be able to include it into the work products that they have scheduled,” offered Nathan Simmonds, the PFA's director of finance and administration. With the rest of the work now scheduled to be completed at the beginning of August, WMA leadership “needs to be able to identify the funding and schedule the work to be completed within that time,” Mr. Simmonds said.

Governor Bryan expressed doubt that the cash-strapped WMA could meet that timeline when it came to making decisions about capital expenses. “It's not going to be quick...and I really want to get this project done,” he said. “Now we started it so we have a big gate on it...I'm tired of seeing tourists standing up in front of the gate, wondering why they can't climb the 99 stairs. We need to get this resolved quickly.”

The PFA chair suggested that the agency could “front the cost of this project and have an MOU with Waste Management that once FEMA reimburse them, they'll reimburse us. Otherwise, they're gonna be here forever.” Mr. Bryan also suggested that despite the contractor's assertion that work could be finished within 120 days, the board not “tie a completion date to this project.”

With no further discussion or dissent, the board approved a motion that authorized the pending change orders and raised the project cap to \$725,000 to accommodate the additional sewer work. The Director of Finance has also now been tasked with drafting the memorandum of understanding with WMA that governs the reimbursement of costs incurred in the replacement of the sewer line.