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## Sewage Spills, Blocked Drains, and Deteriorating Pipes: WMA Calls for Major Overhaul of St. Thomas Wastewater System

**With raw sewage flooding Veterans Drive and over 10 “catastrophic” sites islandwide, WMA and lawmakers say FEMA’s \$3.2 billion aid won’t fix aging lateral lines on private properties, leaving costly gaps and mounting health concerns.**

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Aerial view of Charlotte Amalie and Veterans Drive, including the Windward Passage Hotel area where sewage overflows have plagued nearby businesses and residents. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The prudent replacement of the territory's "aged and failing" wastewater infrastructure is the only long-term solution to current issues plaguing the Virgin Islands, particularly St. Thomas, said the Waste Management Authority's interim executive director Daryl Griffith.

Mr. Griffith appeared before the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services on Monday to provide an update on the "growing challenges posed by the direct discharge of minimally processed wastewater in public areas." According to Mr. Griffith, the existing wastewater system is "becoming increasingly expensive and difficult to operate and maintain daily." Recent hurricanes and storms have "multiplied" the challenges.

Lawmakers were concerned by Mr. Griffith's revelation that "over 10 locations in the territory [are] deemed catastrophic failures" where "sanitary sewer overflow" affects residents and the environment. The cost of these repairs, he said, "exceeds \$100,000." Veterans Drive in Charlotte Amalie is one example of a severe case, explained Mr. Griffith. The underground line failure there is "not only worsening, but expanding."

Businesses and property owners on Kronprindsens Gade are among the affected, including Senator Alma Francis Heyliger.

According to Mr. Griffith, portions of the underground system have stormwater and wastewater lines improperly connected. As a result, during heavy rain, excess water flows into the sewer lines, leading to untreated sewage spilling onto streets such as Kronprindsens Gade. "We're cutting those connections so that no longer occurs," Mr. Griffith explained.

"I kept spending my money to clean up the ditch. That's what we were doing in that neighborhood for years," Senator Francis Heyliger complained. She says her attempts to bring attention to the issue as a "regular constituent" have fallen on deaf ears. "It got to the point I couldn't even get to my building, how it was flooded behind there for so long. I couldn't even get to my own property. But they want me to pay property taxes."

She complained about the optics, particularly for guests of the neighboring Windward Passage Hotel on Veterans Drive, parallel to her street. "This is right next to a hotel where you have all of these tourists looking out their balconies. And this is what represents the Virgin Islands: a nasty, dirty, sewage-ridden ditch, that for some delusional reason, we cannot get sorted."

Anselmo Oleo, who owns a business next to the senator's property, also complained about the situation. Inebriated tourists, he said, "fall into this thing."

"We sit here with all the logistics under the sun but in the 15 years since I bought that property, nothing has been fixed," Senator Francis Heyliger added. "I don't know if people are just lazy, people just like collecting a paycheck, people just like to go along to get along, but we as a community have to do better."

That area, said Mr. Griffith, is not even the most challenged in the territory. Over 150 sanitary overflows have been addressed for the year to date. In addition to WMA's daily maintenance efforts, "I'm going to commit the team to go in there and take a closer look to see what we can do to address this situation and have it stop," he promised the business owners.

Keith Smith, who has territorial oversight for wastewater, explained that near the Windward Passage Hotel, "the storm drain itself is blocked." Additionally, neighboring properties are still fitted with old iron pipes that are currently rusting away. Therefore, their wastewater is now "running into the storm drain." WMA, he explained, needs to clear the stormwater culvert and

subsequently have the “old cast iron lines from those residences that go into our system repaired.”

Committee chair Senator Ray Fonseca encouraged the Department of Health to test the water that collects in the area. “People live there, people work there, people walk the street,” he said.

Any current repairs done in the territory will only be temporary, albeit increasingly necessary. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has already obligated billions of dollars for the prudent replacement of WMA’s system: \$2.1 billion for St. Thomas, another \$1 billion for St. Croix, and \$83.6 million for St. John. These obligations were made between October 2024 and January 2025, and “the Authority has aggressively begun procuring the necessary equipment and services since these funds were obligated,” Mr. Griffith said.

He believes that the provided funding isn’t enough, however, as it only covers “the public roadway of the underground sewage.” Lateral connections to private homes and businesses remain unfunded. “The last estimates we got were close to \$600 - \$800 million” for that aspect of the work, Mr. Griffith told Senator Fonseca. WMA has asked FEMA to “reconsider and to pay for the laterals for individuals.” However, “you can’t utilize federal money to install the lateral on private property, and that’s what they have an issue with.” WMA currently charges an “access fee” of \$100 for lateral connections to main lines.

In the meantime, Mr. Griffith says there is a case to be made to grant the WMA more funding for maintenance. Referring to the sewer tax funds, he told Senator Milton Potter that “we’ve added more people to the sewer lines. The amount collected should be closer to \$4 million.”

Maintenance, though, is “maybe 40% of the problem,” Mr. Griffith estimated. “The lines are just simply deteriorating because they’re past the useful life.”

Portions of the prudent replacement project are currently in bundles being managed by the Super Project Management Office. WMA anticipates receiving responses for a request for proposals for the eastern portion of St. Thomas next week. WMA is also working with the Office of Disaster Recovery to remove St. Thomas’ midtown area from a bundled arrangement “so we can start the design immediately.”