

With \$800K Spent Annually on Rent, DPNR Seeks Permanent Facilities on St. Croix and St. Thomas

DPNR says it's preparing to acquire and renovate two long-term facilities—one in St. Croix using a FEMA Project Worksheet, and the other in St. Thomas's Old Barracks—with hopes of ending years of lease dependency that drains critical resources.

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DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The amount spend on leases by the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources came under scrutiny by Senator Novelle Francis, the chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance during Thursday's budget hearing.

“You're spending well over \$800,000 in leases and rentals. \$331,000 St. Croix, \$471,000 on St. Thomas. Over eight year period of time, you slated to spend \$6.4 million,” Mr. Francis observed. “Is this of concern to you?” he asked DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol. Mr. Oriol’s response suggested that it is a concern.

“The department is pursuing an opportunity where we can own our own facility in St. Croix using a FEMA PW,” Mr. Oriol shared, referring to a Project Worksheet—the official document used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide funding for disaster-related recovery projects. “We would be able to move into that facility probably two years from now. DPNR has already engaged the current building owner and is “trying to get closing documents.” Then, the focus will shift to architectural and engineering plans and eventually, renovation.

For St. Thomas, Mr. Oriol said it is his intention to “move DPNR into the Old Barracks down in Sub Base...old WAPA building.” “That building is amazing,” said Mr. Oriol. “We spent a million dollars on it already in terms of having a full set of architectural and bid documents done.” The department has already removed asbestos and addressed environmental concerns to the tune of \$700,000.

“We've systematically, over the last three years, been stacking some dollars aside, trying to make sure that we can get in that building,” Mr. Oriol told lawmakers. “We have \$2 million in federal dollars right now. We have \$3 million in local resources. We have another \$1.5 million in proposals that we've written for,” he explained. Still, DPNR needs “another \$4 million to be able to move into that building.” The buildout could take up to two years, the commissioner said. “I think we can get it done for \$9 [million],” he said.

Sen. Francis was hopeful. “I think that there's some opportunities that we need to look at,” he told Mr. Oriol. “I can't imagine that we'll continue for the next 10 years to pay, you know, rental leases.” He was optimistic that lawmakers could possibly convene and “provide some funding to support that,” which would allow DNPR to potentially meet its financial goals sooner.

“A lot of times we are reluctant to want to spend the money to purchase these buildings, but over time, we pay for them five and ten fold,” the committee’s chair noted.