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Nearly a Year Later, Derelict Boat Still Lingers in Charlotte Amalie Harbor as DPNR Loses Patience

A year after a vessel was damaged during Tropical Storm Ernesto, DPNR says it's done waiting for the owner to act; high bacteria counts in harbor water have lawmakers urging public safety signs as DPNR prepares penalties and possible removal.

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Aerial view of the Charlotte Amalie waterfront (Veterans Drive). By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

A storm-damaged vessel partially submerged in Charlotte Amalie's waters has remained there for nearly a year, creating an eyesore. Now, both lawmakers and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources say patience is running thin.

Senator Avery Lewis jumped at the opportunity to seek an update when DPNR appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Thursday. “I have one big question. What about the old boat out there?” he asked.

“We have grown impatient with what’s happening right now,” replied DPNR commissioner Jean Piere Oriol. “The contractor was nervous about getting in the water because there was raw discharge that was taking place,” he explained. Aware of that situation, DPNR granted the contractor some leeway. Nearly a year on, DPNR tested the water in the harbor as a means of prompting the contractor to get in the water, and remove the vessel. The results, however, weren’t very favorable.

“We tested the water, actually just last week and this week, and both instances have come back, and the lab has said your bacteria count is extremely high,” Mr. Oriol explained. But DPNR is no longer willing to wait. The department intends to “send notice to the owner that says that by now, you all could have figured out whatever your alternative was,” the commissioner said. DPNR, for its part, cleared several vessels from the harbor after Tropical Storm Ernesto. “They could have used a crane barge to come and lift rather than getting in the water putting float bags underneath it, like we did,” Mr. Oriol argued.

“We are now invoking penalty provisions in order to speed that up. And then if I end up removing it, then it will be the cost of the removal plus the penalty provision,” Oriol explained. “We notified them that we were taking away our boats and that we could have arranged the same... We are pushing back now because it's getting ridiculous.”

“Tell them get their act together. Our harbor needs to be clean,” Senator Lewis declared.

Lawmakers, unsettled at the news that bacteria levels in the harbor are high, encouraged DPNR to test the water’s quality and post signs advising residents against swimming and fishing in it. Mr. Oriol was not immediately convinced that doing so would be necessary “because we don't swim in the harbor, or at least it's not customary.” Testing would come at a hefty cost. “It's \$400 every time we run a sample. And so if you're going to do it on a weekly basis, that's \$400 times 52,” he explained.

“That could be the fees assessed to the board, but again, for consumer public safety, based on what you are saying, I think we should address it somehow,” urged Senator Dwayne DeGraff.