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DPW Seeks \$26M to Accelerate Roadwork and Modernize VITRAN With New Medium-Size Buses and ADA Vans

DPW is requesting \$26.1 million in local funds for FY26 to advance road and infrastructure upgrades across the territory and modernize VITRAN with nine medium-duty buses and 12 ADA vans, as lawmakers push for expanded, reliable public transit service.

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To achieve its goals in FY2026, the V.I. Department of Public Works is requesting a general fund budget allocation of \$23,958,321. DPW's request includes an additional \$1 million from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund and \$1,225,000 from the Anti-Litter and Beautification Fund for a total amount of \$26,183,321. It's an increase of approximately half a million dollars over the previous year's budget.

That was the testimony of Derek Gabriel, DPW's commissioner, when he appeared before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Wednesday. Combined with DPW's federal funding, Mr. Gabriel expects that the \$26.1 million from local sources will enable the Department to continue its push toward project completion. This, as the St. Croix district has seen a massive uptick in road rehabilitation, and smaller-scale projects are being completed in the St. Thomas/St. John district. According to Mr. Gabriel, between fiscal years 2021 and 2024, the "territorial spend on road maintenance...totals \$108,592,180.11."

Other promised infrastructural projects are also moving through the pipeline. DPW is currently managing 186 projects, 67 of which "belong" to the department, while the remaining 119 are user agency projects. The work underway includes drainage work along First Avenue and in downtown Charlotte Amalie, Fort Christian parking lot renovations, repairs to Center Line Road on St. John, the rehabilitation of restrooms in Cruz Bay, and restoring lights along the Melvin Evans Highway.

Road rehabilitation in the St. Thomas/St. John District pales in comparison to St. Croix, something that both Mr. Gabriel and several lawmakers pointed out. On St. Thomas, "Port Authority actually is doing repairs at the runway, and that really takes precedent over our projects because that has to be done in a certain time frame," explained Mr. Gabriel. That's because the contractor for the airport work is assigned to several road projects. "They should have been completed by now, but our goal is to get them done before the end of September," he promised. That includes roads in the Bovoni area. "Our goal is to really have significant spend in this district. St. Croix saw a lot of it. So St. Thomas and St. John is our focus."

A significant portion of Wednesday's conversation focused not just on road conditions, but activities happening on the roads, particularly the state of public transport.

Mr. Gabriel informed lawmakers that the Division of Transportation has "combined grant funds of \$2.7 million to design, fabricate and deliver nine new medium-duty fixed-route buses." The buses are "currently in production" and are expected to reach "substantial completion" in February. Grant funds are also available to purchase 12 new ADA paratransit vans totaling \$1.2 million. This is "necessary due to the increase in paratransit clientele and the retirement of vans that have surpassed their useful life."

In fact, the Department is facing a challenge in disposing of vehicles that have surpassed their useful life. "We have begun investigating ways of disposing of them, probably getting them out of the territory to some place that will accept them," explained Carol McGregor, DPW's deputy commissioner with responsibility for transportation.

Apart from modernizing the VITRAN fleet with smaller buses that are better able to traverse the territory's topography, DPW is also attempting to improve its services. DPW is currently undertaking a transit study and conceptualizing a separate 2050 Master Transportation Plan and intends to host community engagements. Residents and visitors will be invited to "participate and give their outlook on the services provided."

In the interim, lawmakers are encouraging the Department to strengthen the existing VITRAN services. Senator Carla Joseph referenced the potential for VITRAN to operate 7 days a week. "We have a growing population. They are not driving anymore. It's costly for gas, and they need to get around. And trust me, the taxis are too expensive and the illegal taxis are worse," she told Mr. Gabriel.

“I know our focus in the last two years has been just trying to add Saturday service. That's been a huge ask from the community,” replied Mr. Gabriel. Doing so would require “local funding” from an already cash-strapped government. Additional commentary from Deputy Commissioner McGregor is that fixed-route services were reduced “due to financial constraints.” It costs DPW \$7 million to operate VITRAN, \$5 million of which is allocated from local funds.

Additionally, the transit study will guide DPW on the need to improve or expand VITRAN services primarily based on “traffic trends.” Senator Avery Lewis suggested a route to service the Magen’s Bay area. “We took a bus there to look at the feasibility of running that service. What's needed right now is the additional equipment and additional bus operators,” explained Ms. McGregor. DPW has done the same in Lovenlund.

VITRAN, complained Senator Hubert Frederick, “is totally unreliable.” A business owner, Mr. Frederick said several of his employees blame the infrequent bus service for their absence from work. “I feel bad too, because I have terminated employees because of that, and that's wrong,” he told Mr. Gabriel. “I can't be the head of the Economic Development and Agriculture Committee, asking businesses to come here when I can't even provide basic transportation for employees to get to and from work,” he lamented.

“We talk about it all the time, establishing micro routes, getting more buses, adding more transfer stations,” Mr. Gabriel replied. “We're moving in that direction, which is one of the reasons why instead of doing the heavy-duty buses, we're moving toward medium-duty buses.” At least one additional VITRAN bus is out of service after [recently colliding with a private vehicle](#) and ploughing into a fuel pump at a St. Croix gas station.

Lawmakers are holding on to hope that the Department will be able to breathe new life into the territory’s roads and the services that operate upon them. To that end, they will soon consider DPW’s budget request, which includes \$7,574,110 in personnel costs, \$3,824,234 in associated fringe benefits, \$5,371,572 for other services and charges, \$868,000 for supplies, \$828,000 for utilities, and \$300,000 for capital outlays. The Public Transportation Fund includes \$4,992,315, and the Inter-Island Subsidy, which supports ferry operators, is budgeted at \$200,000.