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Paul E. Joseph Stadium Costs Climb to \$32M After 11 Years, As Lawmakers Decry Delays, Off-the-Record Deals, and "Broken Promises"

GEC's stadium contract has now spanned 11 years, 24 change orders, and \$32.3 million in spending—with lawmakers questioning a surprise \$1.5M DPW payout, a December 25th completion date, and a contractor they say continues to underperform.

Development / **Published On July 19, 2025 05:57 AM /**

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The Paul E. Stadium, in development for 11 years. By. DPW.

Representatives of GEC, LLC and the Departments of Public Works, Property and Procurement, Planning and Natural Resources, and Sports, Parks and Recreation all filed into the Legislature on Friday to provide testimony on the Paul E. Joseph Stadium project on St. Croix, some 11 years

after a contract was first executed.

After testifiers failed to appear for a June 11th meeting of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports, and Parks, its chair, Senator Angel Bolques Jr., issued subpoenas to mandate their presence. Friday's meeting, insisted Bolques, was "not to cast blame" but instead "establish facts."

For context, GEC LLC was initially [awarded a \\$20 million contract in 2014](#), and demolition work began in 2015. The first of 24 change orders added 316 days to the project. Change orders 8 and 13 collectively added 717 more days and some \$2.9 million to the project cost. Between change orders 16 and 20, another 629 days were added. Per Senator Bolques, "no liquidated damages were enforced during this period between 2014 to 2023." A supplemental contract was effected in 2024, adding \$5.124 million and 288 more days. The target completion date was June 20th, 2025, but one more change order has pushed it to December 25th, 2025 – Christmas Day.

"Over 10 change orders added 1662 days, which is approximately 4.5 years to the project," Senator Bolques lamented. "Now we've spent \$32.3 million in 11 years. This isn't federal funds, it's local taxpaying funds," he continued. "We were promised a symbol of hope, a place for our youth to be uplifted...Instead is a half-finished shell, a monument of broken promises and mismanagement and political neglect."

The initial contract awarded to GEC under the de Jongh administration was valued at \$20 million and was estimated to last 30 months. According to Department of Property and Procurement Commissioner Lisa Alejandro, the project was reassessed under the Mapp administration in 2015. The new design rose to \$44 million. "We spent about seven years and five months redesigning and re-permitting the stadium as required under Governor Mapp's redesign," said John Wessel, GEC LLC's managing member. In those seven years, GEC reportedly spent time assessing the appropriate foundation type for the new stadium, as the ground it lay on contained "alluvial fill."

"The orientation of the field was rearranged and positioned to incorporate modifications and changes from previous town hall meetings," explained Derek Gabriel, commissioner of the Department of Public Works. The new location of the field was in the middle of a floodway, a factor that has been the cause of several delays, testifiers repeatedly told lawmakers. The Mapp administration's design was reviewed under the current Bryan administration and scaled down to \$27 million before the two supplemental contracts were awarded.

To date, GEC LLC has received \$25,722,898.54 with a balance of \$6,401,101.46. Still, lawmakers insisted that suitable progress has not been made and called the December 25th deadline impossible. "There's no way that stadium is going to get done by December 25. That day is a special day. Probably expecting a miracle, but ain't going to happen," remarked Senator Marvin Blyden.

Senator Franklin Johnson, who has on many occasions expressed deep-seated dissatisfaction with the project's progress, maintained a similar position on Friday. Though Mr. Wessel could not confirm at the time, Sen. Johnson insisted that there are "approximately three companies as we speak here today, have this company in court for payment for this stadium." This, he said, "tell us that it is not going to be completed because he's going from subcontractor to subcontractor."

By his admission, Senator Johnson frequents the construction site and believes that he has "been to that stadium more than Mr. John Wessel." It's why Johnson was confident that, "I've never seen more than five workers at any given time doing that on that project...It tells me that this contractor

is not putting the full resources of men to this project in order for it to be completed.”

“The government at some point need to say enough is enough,” Mr. Johnson insisted. Senator Kurt Violet agreed. “Why is the government allowing a non-performing contractor to embarrass them?” he asked. “What could be up that we are protecting a contractor that have five, six people working for two, three years and not performing?” He addressed the panel of commissioners: “I know deep down, you guys know that it is total hogwash coming from this non-performing contractor.”

Mr. Wessel would later inform lawmakers that he employs over 20 staff on the project, a response that failed to convince them. He expects that the numbers “may be as high as 40 when we're doing the finishing work.”

As far as project completion stands, DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel estimates it is at 70-75%. Tawana Nicholas, an employee of the Office of Disaster Recovery assigned as project manager, told Senator Johnson that she hopes the project can be completed by Christmas, “but it is doubtful.” For Vincent Roberts, commissioner Nominee at DSPR, it is possible with an “uptick in resources.” Manpower, said Senator Johnson, is the required resource. “When people come asking about more money, I don't want to hear nothing more,” he declared. He rubbished Mr. Wessel’s repeated explanations that the changes under the Mapp administration were responsible for the delays.

“I think, Mr. Wessel, you gonna be the Grinch that stole Christmas,” said Senator Novelle Francis, shifting the conversation once more to the newly proposed deadline. Mr. Francis does not expect that the project can be completed by mid-2026 either, at least not without “significant movement.”

“Why did you continue to take on this job knowing full well that the money that had been earmarked for this would not be able to complete the project?” he asked Mr. Wessel. It was the contractor's argument that he was being “unfairly blamed” for design changes made by the government. Sen. Francis was not moved, insisting that the people of St. Croix have been “disenfranchised.”

“If this was federal money, somebody would have been indicted by now,” he noted. He, like Senator Francis, insisted that the Legislature wouldn't appropriate “another single black penny.” It seems that he may have to go back on his words.

As lawmakers learned on Friday, the Department of Public Works has agreed to pay GEC \$1.5 million in delay costs, primarily stemming from a 2020 stop-work order. Ms. Nicholas explained that \$675,000 of that amount has already been paid to the contractor as a “deposit for the delay claim.” That decision never came before the Legislature.

“Through some negotiations, I made the executive decision to change order out items to allow for the delay claim so that we would not have any further delays,” DPW’s Derek Gabriel reported. Lawmakers were incensed. “Who gave the authorization for you to begin payment of that agreement that you have with Mr. Wessel?” demanded Senator Violet. “That's in violation of all of the bills that we passed. That's a direct violation of the act,” he told Mr. Gabriel.

Gabriel has signaled his intention to come before the Legislature in 30-45 days to request an additional appropriation of the aforementioned \$1.5 million to replace the items that he has ordered out of the project without Legislative oversight.

“These off-the-record deals are, in my opinion, considered totally irresponsible and potentially illegal,” said Senator Kenneth Gittens. “What I'm seeing is ultra vires action, authority not vested in you, to have these conversations on the side and then hold the Legislature, the people of this territory responsible, to now have to come and pay an additional \$1.5 million,” he told Commissioner Gabriel. He demanded “accountability” and “transparency.”

“What happens if the Legislature or our general fund doesn't have this \$1.5 million to give, since you took it upon yourself to make adjustments?” wondered Senator Alma Francis Heyliger. Mr. Gabriel is “envisioning a collaborative discussion where we're able to scrutinize and find \$1.5 million.” If not, items will have to be omitted, he said.

“If you want the \$1.5 million, tell him finish the project. And then December 26, we could pass the money,” insisted Senator Vialet. “We playing into his hand, and he's here, comfortable that he wants \$1.5 million more from this government...like you got shotgun to our head.” In an impassioned line of questioning that went on for over twenty minutes, he urged for more stringent target dates for the contractor. “He has an excellent track record. He has never completed anything,” Mr. Vialet said.

Though the contractor and panel of commissioners are fairly confident that the Paul E. Joseph stadium can be completed by Christmas, Senator Kenneth Gittens has suggested that the entire matter be handled within the courts. However, Senator Marise James had earlier explained that legal success would be difficult as the commissioners were on the record as excusing the delays. “All of the delays were justified, both on the government side and then the contractor,” Commissioner Lisa Alejandro had said.

When Senator Bolques asked about potential opportunities to put the contract out to bid once more, she noted that it “did not lapse, nor were there any disputes with regard to the contract and the government.” Liquidated damages, though increased from \$400 to \$450 a day, were not requested as the Department of Public Works “felt that the delays were somewhat justified.”

Lawmakers spent approximately six hours grilling testifiers on the Paul E. Joseph Stadium. “The contractor GEC has really left a bad taste in my mouth,” noted Senator Avery Lewis. “Trust is earned, and frankly, it's hard to believe anything they say at this point.” He argued that the balance between “ambition” and “fiscal responsibility” was not struck.