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Six Earn Over $100K While 25 Laborers Make Under $35K: Lawmakers Blast School Construction Bureau

At its first budget hearing, lawmakers warned the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance is “total bureaucratic chaos,” saying too many top earners leave too few workers to maintain schools, even as the agency faces unpaid debts and unfunded needs.

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Senators sharply criticized the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance (BSCM) during its first budget hearing on Tuesday, warning that the government’s newest agency is already suffering from a bloated management structure while failing to put enough workers on the ground.

Lawmakers pointed to a payroll imbalance where six employees make over $100,000, while 25 earn less than $35,000 — leaving laborers, who take home as little as $27,310, at the bottom of the scale. Senator Kurt Vialet described the arrangement as “confusion” and “total bureaucratic chaos.”

Senator Carla Joseph voiced concern that “we are not going to have enough people in the trenches to actually do the work,” with Senator Clifford Joseph agreeing that the Bureau needs to prioritize hiring professionals who can directly maintain schools. Vialet added, “When it comes to maintenance of the school, you need workers on the ground. You don’t need a bunch of management positions.”

While the Bureau wants to hire 12 skilled maintenance workers for the St. Thomas/St. John district, none of its six current vacancies include maintenance staff. CFO Charmaine Mayers explained that raises, in some cases as high as $12,000, were offered to employees transferring from the Department of Education, creating further frustration among senators.

Funding concerns compounded lawmakers’ criticism. Mayers presented a proposed FY2026 budget of $9,762,952.80, including $4.76 million from the general fund and $5 million from the School Construction Capital Fund. She told senators that the general fund allocation covers only salaries and fringe benefits, leaving no funding for supplies or other operating expenses. “Limited funds” mean the Bureau cannot even meet its full fringe obligations, she admitted.

Mayers said an additional $1 million noted in the budget reflects rollover funds for a warehouse build-out on St. Croix, not new appropriations. Because of the shortfalls, the Bureau has prepared a supplemental request totaling $3,778,653.26 to cover outstanding fringe obligations, $660,000 in personnel costs, $1.26 million for capital outlay, $180,000 for supplies, $416,000 for other services, and $7,500 for utilities.

Routine school maintenance costs were estimated at nearly $2 million for St. Thomas/St. John and $2.27 million for St. Croix, while $1.48 million is earmarked for capital improvements at non-school facilities. Mayers said that even with the $5 million allocation required by law, BSCM needs another $747,746.52 to meet its upcoming obligations.

Lawmakers also raised concerns about contract transitions from the Department of Education, particularly custodial services. Vialet pressed for clarity, warning that “schools aren’t being cleaned because nobody is saying that it’s their responsibility.” He suggested VIDE may be overfunded while BSCM is left short, a point Committee Chair Novelle Francis acknowledged, noting that “some rework will be required here.”

Beyond structural and funding challenges, senators flagged $1,470,261.12 in outstanding vendor payments already accumulated by the Bureau. With BSCM set to appear before the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on August 29, lawmakers will have another chance to probe its operations and financial management.