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Claude O. Markoe and Eulalie Rivera Still Without Kitchens as VIDE Faces Scrutiny

VIDE officials told lawmakers St. Croix school kitchens were rated “fair” and food service has begun, but senators blasted years of delays at Claude O. Markoe and Eulalie Rivera, pointing to theft, faulty tile work, and contractors who failed to deliver.

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The Eulalie Rivera K-8 School. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

With the school year underway, lawmakers voiced frustration over the state of school kitchens in St. Croix after an assessment by the School Food Authority rated them only “fair.” The report, delivered at a Friday Committee on Education and Workforce Development meeting, underscored both ongoing deficiencies and the urgency of addressing long-standing problems at specific

schools.

Assistant Education Commissioner Victor Somme III told lawmakers that “despite the need for additional updated kitchen equipment, most of which necessitates electrical improvements, school kitchens were prepared.” Preparations included extermination, grease trap cleaning, and refilling gas tanks, enabling food service — breakfast and lunch — to begin for students in the district.

But some schools still lack functioning kitchens, a point highlighted by Senator Franklin Johnson. “I think Claude O. Markoe school been without a kitchen for probably maybe seven, eight years,” he said. Craig Benjamin, executive director of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance, confirmed that Claude O. Markoe Elementary and Eulalie Rivera K-8 are the two schools without operational kitchens.

Johnson called the situation “unacceptable” and pressed for a timeline. While Benjamin pledged that work at Claude O. Markoe would be “accelerated” and that a new contractor for Eulalie Rivera has been told to speed up completion, Johnson said the responses fell short. Because students are back in school, work can only occur on weekends, but Benjamin maintained that “it doesn’t require a whole lot to be completed.”

Still, Johnson stressed the need for urgency. “I sure hope that these children don’t have to have meals [transported] from one school to the next, because that’s not a hot meal all the time,” he said.

According to Carla Bastien-Knight of the Department of Education, the Claude O. Markoe kitchen is a “fully funded AARP renovation project” but has been delayed by change orders. At Eulalie Rivera, progress was derailed when thieves stole brand-new kitchen equipment, including two industrial ovens, a commercial hood, an ice machine, a tile cutter, and other tools. The theft occurred just days after the committee chair, Senator Kurt Violet, suggested the crime [might have been an inside job](#).

Although a community partner has since offered to replace the stolen equipment, Benjamin said the donor is “holding on to it until the appropriate time to have them installed,” which will not be until after electrical and tiling work is completed.

The tile work itself was another source of contention. Violet said he noticed “holes” in the newly installed tiles during a visit to the school and was unconvinced by Benjamin’s explanation that the damage may have been caused by thieves using “a heavy forklift or something” during the theft. “So you’re saying that the thieves put a forklift on a truck, open the gate, open the door, drove the forklift into the kitchen?” Violet asked, incredulous. Benjamin later clarified that it might have been a motorized or non-motorized pallet jack.

Regardless, the tiles will need replacement. Johnson added that the contractor “did not do proper work” and suggested pursuing damages. Benjamin replied, “We have not taken him to court,” but noted that the contractor had been terminated and that a new contractor is being sought.

Until the kitchens at Claude O. Markoe and Eulalie Rivera are complete, daily meals for students will continue to be prepared off-site and delivered.