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Public Learns Details of Major Raphune Hill Road Upgrades on St. Thomas During CZM Meeting

Federal and local officials outlined long-awaited improvements to Raphune Hill Road, including intersection realignment, lane expansion, and safety upgrades, as part of a multi-phase project aimed at easing congestion and improving visibility.

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ST. THOMAS — During Tuesday's Coastal Zone Management Committee meeting, the public was given an opportunity to learn more about the major improvements planned for the Raphune Hill Road on St. Thomas.

At the center of the discussion was the project's federal consistency determination application for the relocation of the Route 381 intersection with Raphune Hill Road.

According to Kim Campo-Allen, an environmental protection specialist with the Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division of the Federal Highway Administration, the division “will be overseeing the administration of the construction contract for the project.” She explained that the Department of Public Works, the local cooperating agency, has been “leading the right of way acquisition process...and assisting with the DPNR public noticing requirements.” The department was also responsible for securing funding and will maintain the roadways once construction is complete. Regarding the acquisition of adjacent properties, Ms. Campo-Allen noted that the process is currently well underway.

She explained that the current planned works “has evolved from a number of past planning and environmental studies that have proposed improvements to the east-west traffic movement through Charlotte Amalie,” dating back to 1984. Work on improving Raphune Hill has been ongoing since 2008. The first phase of the project, completed in 2017, improved the intersection of Route 38 with Route 313.

The second phase — the subject of Tuesday’s federal consistency determination application — will realign that intersection. The third and final phase, Ms. Campo-Allen indicated, will involve widening a ¾-mile stretch of Raphune Hill Road from two to four lanes. She noted that this final phase is not expected to begin until after 2027, “depending on funding availability and project priorities.”

The overall goal of the intersection improvements, Ms. Campo-Allen said, “is to reduce congestion and improve safety...at the crest of Raphune Hill.” She explained that “on the north side, two private driveways and Route 381 intersect with Raphune Hill Road. The steep grade of the road and the configuration of the intersection results in poor sight distance for vehicles travelling on Raphune Hill Road, as well as vehicles entering Raphune Hill Road from Route 381 and the private driveways there.”

Once the project is complete, the new intersection “would be designed to accommodate a future traffic signal, crosswalks, sidewalks and bus stops,” Ms. Campo-Allen stated. About 750 feet of Route 381 would also be realigned to meet the new intersection and would include travel lanes, guard rail systems, a concrete sidewalk on one side, and a turning lane at the intersection, she continued. “The way the projects were phased, they each have their own independent utility of each other,” Ms. Campo-Allen explained.

She added that the proposed work must be mindful of potential impacts on the island’s population of brown-throated parakeets, which have been known to use parts of the project area “for foraging and potentially nesting.” Pre-construction surveys will be conducted to identify any nests in the work zone, Ms. Campo-Allen said, noting that there will be “co-ordination with DPNR if nests are found.” She also explained that project teams are expected to collaborate with archaeological and historic officials to mitigate any adverse effects on two areas within the project site that may be eligible for historic designation.

Officials are hoping that work on this phase of the project can begin next year, though Ms. Campo-Allen cautioned that progress is “pending right of way and obtaining all permits” before construction can proceed.

After several clarifying questions from the public — much of the discussion focusing on how existing landowners may be affected by property acquisition during phases two and three — the meeting concluded with a reminder that members of the public still have one week to submit comments or questions. A decision meeting on the federal consistency determination application is expected to take place in approximately one month.

