

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill to Provide More Land for Charlotte Amalie High School Rebuild Wins Senate Support

Lawmakers advanced legislation to transfer a Ross Estate parcel from the Housing Finance Authority for exclusive Department of Education use, as officials said the site is critical to rebuilding Charlotte Amalie High School without delaying construction.

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Architectural rendering of the rebuilt Charlotte Amalie High School campus on St. Thomas.

Legislation to transfer a parcel of land from the V.I. Housing Finance Authority for the exclusive use of the Department of Education received support from the Committee on

Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, as officials argued the property is necessary to move forward with the rebuilding of Charlotte Amalie High School.

The land at the center of the proposal is Parcel No. 2C Estate Ross, 8 New Quarter. Stakeholders told lawmakers the property is needed to support reconstruction of Charlotte Amalie High School.

Bill 36-0257, sponsored by Senator Avery Lewis, would facilitate the transfer of that land to the Department of Property and Procurement for the Department of Education's exclusive use. Lewis said deeding the property to Education would ensure that Charlotte Amalie High School has the "space, stability, and long term capacity" to serve students. He noted that the school already has two buildings on the property, and said unfettered use of the broader tract would help ensure instruction is not interrupted once reconstruction begins.

At present, the V.I. Department of Education leases the property from the Housing Finance Authority for \$25,000 per year. Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington said VIHFA determined that it would not allow VIDE to use the property "without a cost." She described that decision as "very insincere," noting that the two entities "have an agreement in place where they utilize our property for free." Following renewed negotiations, however, HFA increased the lease to \$78,408.

Wells-Hedrington explained that because Charlotte Amalie High School is effectively landlocked, the parcel would be used as a "laydown" area for temporary storage of materials and supplies. She said VIDE was unsuccessful in acquiring another neighboring property, leaving the HFA parcel as the only available option.

She also warned lawmakers that the available \$3.5 billion in FEMA funding for the rebuilding of education facilities will not be increased despite rising construction costs. "This means that the longer we wait to build, the more it costs," Ms. Wells-Hedrington said. Transferring the land would "allow construction of the school to begin now," she added.

Though she was not present at the meeting, Adrienne Williams, director of the Office of Disaster Recovery, supported the proposal. The Department of Property and Procurement, which is expected to become custodian of the land, also agreed with the measure.

Assistant Commissioner Vincent Richards testified that the bill "reflects sound principles of asset management and underscores the government's continued commitment to investing in educational infrastructure."

The Housing Finance Authority, however, opposed the bill. Executive Director Eugene Jones did not attend the meeting, and no representative or board member appeared on the authority's behalf. Its testimony was instead read into the record.

According to that testimony, VIHFA did not support the bill as proposed and objected "in both process and substance." The authority outlined the existing lease agreement and the newly negotiated agreement with VIDE, saying the increase stemmed from VIDE's request to use an additional 52,272 square feet of the property as part of the "laydown yard." The testimony further stated that "at no point during these negotiations...was the

Authority informed, formally or informally, of any intent, need, or strategic plan...to expand the physical footprint” of Charlotte Amalie High School.

In written testimony, Jones argued that the legislation’s introduction is “disingenuous and represents a significant departure from established interagency collaboration practices.”

The authority also maintained that the property is “not surplus land” and said it had intended to use it. “VIHFA has been engaged in active discussions with the V.I. Police Department regarding the potential use of this property as the permanent site for critical law enforcement infrastructure,” the testimony stated. As a result, the authority argued, the transfer would “not only disrupt existing agreements and active negotiations...but would also create potential legal and financial implications associated with an active lease and prospective lease.”

Because no one from HFA was present, lawmakers were unable to assess the veracity of the authority’s testimony during the hearing. Still, during his allotted time, Senator Marvin Blyden said he had spoken with Jones after the testimony was submitted.

Senator Marvin Blyden said Eugene Jones told him he intended to formally put in writing that the land would be given to the Department of Education. However, because Jones was not present in the chamber, lawmakers were unable to verify that in real time.

With that issue appearing closer to resolution, committee members voiced broad support for the measure. Senator Dwayne DeGraff, a Charlotte Amalie High School alumnus, said he was “100%” on board with the proposal.

Senator Kurt Violet also raised the possibility of constructing physical education infrastructure on the property if the school ultimately gains additional land, noting that Charlotte Amalie High School has lacked such facilities for years.

Bill 36-0257 now heads to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.