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DPNR Seeks \$3 Million to Retrofit St. Thomas Office and Cut \$350,000 Annual Rent

DPNR wants lawmakers to transfer \$3 million from the St. Thomas Capital Improvement Fund to retrofit the old Navy barracks in Estate Sub Base, a move Jean Pierre Oriol says could cut annual rent costs by 72% while libraries and vendors remain concerns.

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DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources is asking lawmakers to provide \$3 million to help retrofit a permanent office location on St. Thomas, a move Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol says could eventually save the department more than \$350,000 in annual rental costs.

During DPNR's budget hearing on Thursday, Mr. Oriol described the effort to establish a permanent St. Thomas office as "a major initiative that I was unable to accomplish..." He said the department has been able to "secure interest" in the old Navy barracks building in Estate Sub Base and has completed 100% of the architectural and engineering designs and bid documents.

However, the cost of the renovation project has risen sharply. Mr. Oriol said the original \$4.5 million project cost has "doubled" because of inflation.

The commissioner said DPNR has submitted federal funding applications and is still awaiting responses. In the meantime, the department has "allocated approximately \$4 million of our generated revenue towards this project."

Mr. Oriol said legislative support is the most direct way to continue moving the project forward. In St. Thomas, DPNR pays "over \$350,000 per year in rent, which is likely to increase very soon," he told lawmakers. Moving into a DPNR-owned facility "could reduce operating expenses by 72%, still leaving \$100,000 per year toward maintenance," he said.

Mr. Oriol identified the St. Thomas Capital Improvement Fund as a potential funding source. Through Act 9066, the government sold submerged and filled submerged land to the Virgin Islands Port Authority for \$7 million, with \$3 million deposited into the fund. Mr. Oriol is asking the Legislature to transfer that funding to DPNR so the department can replace the roof, remove and replace damaged doors and windows, and seal and paint the building.

Senator Novelle Francis, chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, appeared open to the request.

"It's something that we'll take under advisement and have much discussion as we contemplate your budget request. \$350,000 a year becomes astronomical over a period of time," he stated.

DPNR's \$3 million request for the St. Thomas facility is not included in its approved FY2027 budget request. The department's proposed budget stands at \$212,433,002, including \$9,481,921 from the General Fund, \$13,717,158 from non-appropriated local funds and \$189,233,923 in federal grants.

Mr. Oriol clarified that \$126 million of the federal funding is "allocated to land acquisition and infrastructure grants that pass through DPNR."

The General Fund allocation is 35.3% higher than DPNR's FY2026 appropriation. It includes \$4,847,146 for personnel, \$2,803,453 for fringe benefits, \$213,500 for supplies, \$983,828 for other services and charges, and \$634,001 for utilities.

DPNR's non-appropriated funds and part of its federal funding also contribute to those budget categories. Federal funds include \$27,944,548 for capital outlay, while \$3,350,792 is earmarked from local non-appropriated funds for the same purpose.

In a broader discussion of DPNR's finances and operations, lawmakers also learned that outstanding vendor payments total \$2,180,230.10. Apryl Henry, director of Business and Administration, said the "majority are over 120 days."

Like other agencies with accounts payable, Ms. Henry said the invoices are "still within the ERP system, awaiting approval from [the Department of] Finance, and also check run." She said the Department of Finance usually acts with urgency when outstanding payments may "affect our

office.”

Enforcement staffing also drew attention during the hearing. Senator Francis said he was aware that “manpower is dwindling.” DPNR currently has only two enforcement officers on St. Thomas and six on St. Croix.

With four vacancies on St. Thomas, Senator Marvin Blyden urged the department to fill those positions.

“There's a lot of lawlessness going on in this district every day, especially with all the different projects going on; personal projects [and] construction work.”

Libraries were another major focus of the hearing. DPNR is anticipating the reopening of the Dr. Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library, the Enid M. Baa facility and the Athalie McFarlane Petersen Library. Mr. Oriol testified that the department intends to use “the bulk of the 35% increase in the general fund appropriation to prioritize vacancies” in its Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums.

The Turnbull Library is in the contract closeout phase, but Mr. Oriol said he wants to “build the staff back up” before the ribbon is officially cut. That facility requires nine employees.

Senator Kurt Vialet questioned why DPNR has been unable to fill vacancies across consecutive fiscal years and said the department will continue to register significant savings from vacant posts. Mr. Oriol said several of the vacancies are library positions, and that it would not be “prudent for us to actually bring on staff” while three of the four libraries remain closed.

There are 19 vacant library positions.

“We are going to make every effort we can to onboard all 19...” Mr. Oriol told Senator Vialet.

Mr. Vialet questioned whether the positions should be fully funded in the FY2027 budget if they will not all be filled at the start of the fiscal year.

“If those positions are not going to be coming on board on October 1, then there is not a need to fund those positions as 100%, but we definitely don't want to get rid of the positions,” he said.

Lawmakers also discussed delayed physical infrastructure projects under DPNR’s oversight, including a boat ramp at Krouse Lagoon. When Senator Francis asked for an update, Mr. Oriol said the project had a \$1 million budget, but designs could cost \$300,000 and “they were saying that the ramp structure itself was going to cost \$2 million to actually implement.”

DPNR is now looking at how to “leverage some of our federal opportunities to mix with that money, so that we would be able to complete at least getting that ramp back open.”

Senator Francis expressed frustration, pointing to other instances where design costs appear high compared with overall project budgets.

“I wonder when we're going to say that we have a million dollars, so design something that fits into that million dollars,” he said.

The Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance is expected to consider DPNR's extra-budgetary request for the St. Thomas office project, as reducing high rental costs has remained a recurring issue during consecutive budget hearings.

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