

Public Works Seeks \$24.3 Million as 300 Projects, 33 Vacancies and Rising Costs Strain Operations

DPW is seeking \$24.3 million from the General Fund for fiscal 2027 as it manages more than 300 active projects, 33 vacancies, rising material and fuel costs, road repairs, cemetery expansion and new statutory duties imposed without additional resources.

Development / **Published On July 10, 2026 06:28 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **July 10, 2026**

Image not found or type unknown



Roadwork underway in June 2026 at the Melvin Evans Highway–Airport Road intersection, part of more than 300 active projects being managed by the Department of Public Works across the territory. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The V.I. Department of Public Works is requesting \$24,303,120 from the General Fund for fiscal year 2027 as it manages more than 300 active projects, 33 vacancies, rising construction and

operating costs, and additional responsibilities that officials say were imposed without the resources needed to carry them out.

The request is expected to be supplemented by \$1 million from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund, \$1.3 million from the Anti-Litter and Beautification Funds, and \$5 million from the Transportation Trust Fund.

Appearing before the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, Public Works Commissioner Derek Gabriel said the department must account for economic and workforce pressures while ensuring that public projects are properly funded.

“We must speak candidly about the shifting macroeconomic factors governing public works in 2026,” Mr. Gabriel told lawmakers.

He cited rising global prices for asphalt, concrete materials and heavy machinery parts. Locally, the department is “absorbing higher fuel costs and the recent increase in the territorial minimum wage...”

Those conditions “require us to carefully balance fiscal responsibility with maintaining the level of service our residents expect and require,” Mr. Gabriel testified.

The department is also confronting a “unique human capital procurement challenge on St. John.”

According to Mr. Gabriel, a “persistent shortage of localized candidates forces us to rely on dedicated St. Thomas personnel who commute daily.”

DPW is “explicitly asking for this committee’s partnership to establish enhanced recruitment incentives for St. Johnians.”

The commissioner warned that failing to account for wage, workforce and market conditions would be “to risk falling back into a cycle of deferred maintenance.”

There are currently 33 vacancies within the department.

Mr. Gabriel said DPW is overseeing more than 300 active projects across the territory. Although the department has made progress, he said it remains “stretched extremely in this regard, despite our efforts to hire and promote more project managers, engineers, construction managers, and other technical staff,”

The commissioner also identified projects that are already “in motion” but will require additional funding “beyond our FY 2027 budget.”

Those needs include continued expansion and maintenance of the territory’s cemeteries, as well as the digitization of cemetery records. Assistant Commissioner Rueben Jennings said negotiations are underway with property owners to obtain additional cemetery space.

The deteriorating pedestrian bridge at the intersection of the former Addelita Cancryn School and Western Cemetery No. 3 remains another unresolved funding concern.

Mr. Gabriel described the bridge as a “hot button topic...as the deterioration is evident,”

Two years ago, the department received a preliminary estimate of “approximately \$600,000” to demolish the structure. DPW continues to assess its options, but Mr. Gabriel warned that

“whatever the path forward chosen, it will require local funding.”

The commissioner also raised concerns about Act 9100, which contains two sections assigning responsibilities to DPW that were signed into law without consultation or testimony from the department.

Section 8 adds more than 30 private roads to the public road system “without providing the resources necessary to maintain them.”

Section 9 “substantially alters the Department’s advertising program by exempting broad categories of signs...while simultaneously directing the Department to develop an entirely new regulatory framework...”

Mr. Gabriel said the result would be “reduced revenue, increased administrative responsibility, and the greater uncertainty in enforcement, all without additional resources.”

He described Act 9100 as a “simple yet detrimental piece of special interest legislation” that has “set the groundwork for our roadsides to be littered with unregulated signs.”

Much of the hearing focused on the condition of the territory’s roads and the department’s schedule for paving and repairs.

Senator Marvin Blyden asked whether federal funding designated for Charlotte Amalie and Cruz Bay would be spent before the September deadline. Mr. Gabriel said it would.

“50 percent of the calls coming into my office [are] regarding roads,” said Senator Novelle Francis, chairman of the committee.

Mr. Francis identified Barren Spot and Estate Grange among the areas generating concerns. Mr. Gabriel said the department is “addressing them.”

Work in Spring Gut “should be out for solicitation soon...Earlier this year, we did a lot of paving in the Grove and La Grange neighbourhoods.”

FEMA-funded projects expected to begin later this year will also address several other areas, the commissioner said.

DPW is nevertheless considering the timing of planned utility undergrounding projects when deciding where to pave immediately.

The department is “trying to balance where to do road maintenance and paving versus what just to defer until those projects come online,” Mr. Gabriel explained.

Senator Kurt Vialet learned that the department does not have enough employees assigned specifically to road patching on St. Croix.

Mr. Jennings said a dedicated patching unit could be adequately staffed with 12 employees. The base salary for each worker would be the minimum wage of \$35,000.

Mr. Vialet said establishing the unit could be a “good investment for the Virgin Islands.”

Senator Ray Fonseca asked about the clearing of guts across the territory.

Mr. Jennings said DPW is “making steady progress...we do have some guts remaining, but we have those on schedule for this month.”

Senator Carla Joseph relayed concerns from constituents who have requested speed bumps on some neighborhood roads.

“If you need me to put it in writing as well, I will be happy to do it,” she told the commissioner.

During the hearing, Mr. Gabriel made several remarks suggesting that the appearance could be his final budget presentation as commissioner of Public Works.

He highlighted the department’s construction and transportation work since he took office.

“ I don't mean to sound egotistical, but I don't think the Virgin Islands has ever seen this kind of spend on construction on roads in such a short space of time. Numbers don't lie. We've spent an insane amount of money.”

Mr. Gabriel also cited investments in VITRAN, the acquisition of new buses, the new ferry operating between St. Thomas and St. John, and several other major projects as “wins” for the department.