

After Roughly Eight Years Without a Fully Functional Kitchen, Claude O. Markoe Still Needs Gas-Line Overhaul Before Schools Reopen

Officials say meals can be prepared when schools reopen, but the Claude O. Markoe kitchen still needs a gas-line overhaul and other repairs, leaving lawmakers skeptical after roughly eight years without a fully functional food-service facility on site.

Education / **Published On July 15, 2026 06:44 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **July 15, 2026**

Image not found or type unknown



ST. CROIX — The Claude O. Markoe Elementary School kitchen still requires a gas-line overhaul and other repairs as schools prepare to reopen August 10, although education officials maintain that food can be prepared and served from the facility.

The school has been without a fully functional kitchen for approximately eight years. Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance officials told lawmakers Tuesday that the remaining gas-line work should cost less than \$10,000 and can be completed before students return.

The status of the kitchen again came under scrutiny when the V.I. Department of Education and BSCM appeared before the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

In late August 2025, BSCM Executive Director Craig Benjamin promised that work on the kitchen would be “accelerated.”

On Tuesday, Mr. Benjamin told Senator Franklin Johnson that “we are in the process of executing that project to get it completed.”

Pressed further by Mr. Johnson, Mr. Benjamin repeated an update placed on the record in 2025: changes to the ARPA-funded project required “additional funding” that was not covered by federal resources.

Cynthia Allen, BSCM’s assistant director of school construction, maintained that the kitchen could currently be used.

“Claude O. Markoe’s kitchen is operational. There are some deficiencies,” she said.

Mr. Johnson challenged that assessment.

“Please don’t tell me something thinking that I’m going to sit here and accept it,” he told Ms. Allen.

She nevertheless maintained that the kitchen “may not function to its fullest potential, but that’s something that we’re working on. There is some funding that needs to be had in order to purchase and provide what the school needs.”

Ms. Allen affirmed that, despite the deficiencies, food will be prepared and served from the school’s kitchen.

Gas Line Remains Unfinished

Carla Bastian-Knight, superintendent of the St. Croix District, relayed an email from the principal of Claude O. Markoe Elementary School stating that “the gas line installation needs to be completed.”

Ms. Bastian-Knight also reported that other “kitchen-related repairs are essential to ensuring that the food service operations are fully functional when students return...”

Kwame Garcia, BSCM’s St. Croix project manager, said the gas line requires a “rehaul.”

The work “should be under \$10,000,” he told Senator Kurt Vialet, chairman of the committee. Mr. Garcia also said the gas tank may be compromised.

Mr. Vialet questioned the cost estimate, but BSCM official Paul Harrigan explained that the distance between the gas tank and the kitchen requires a “rigid” line.

According to Mr. Harrigan, the line must be constructed from either black galvanized tubing or regular galvanized tubing.

BSCM officials confirmed that the estimated \$10,000 needed for the work is available.

The availability of the funding prompted further questions about why the installation had not already been completed. Mr. Benjamin said the new gas line could be installed by August 10.

Mr. Garcia is preparing a purchase order for submission to BSCM's finance office. Chairmaine Mayers, the bureau's chief financial officer, said the request should be processed quickly.

Mr. Violet asked whether BSCM would be able to provide a positive update on the installation if the committee contacted officials "by next week," Mayers responded, "most definitely."

Eight-Year Delay Frustrates Lawmakers

The kitchen project, which is necessary to provide warm and nutritious meals to students, has remained unfinished for years and predates the establishment of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance.

Mr. Violet used his own time in and out of the Legislature to illustrate how long the issue has remained unresolved.

"I was in the Senate. I spoke about Claude O. Markoe. I sat out two years from the Senate. I spoke about Claude O. Markoe my two years out. I'm back in the Senate. I'm at the end of this two-year term, and we are still talking about Claude O. Markoe," said Senator Violet, outlining the prolonged timeline to complete a single school kitchen.

Mr. Johnson said he intends to visit the school when classes resume on August 10 to determine whether the promised improvements have been completed.