

St. Croix Gets No Direct Access to Bureau of School Construction Funds and No Quarterly Deep-Cleaning Contract While St. Thomas Has Both

Lawmakers say BSCM's St. Thomas-centered structure leaves St. Croix managers dependent on off-island approval for routine purchases, while schools there lack quarterly deep cleaning — disparities senators again described as neglect and unequal treatment.

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BSCM Executive Director Craig Benjamin said St. Croix staff rely on St. Thomas for checks and credit-card purchases, as lawmakers criticized disparities in funding access and school cleaning services. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

Lawmakers on Tuesday pressed the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance to give its St. Croix leadership direct access to funds and correct disparities in school deep-cleaning services between the territory's two districts.

The concerns arose after the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development learned that although a \$5,000 imprest, or petty-cash, account was approved for each district, no BSCM leader on St. Croix can directly access those funds without assistance from the St. Thomas office. Senators also learned that St. Thomas schools are covered by an annual contract for quarterly deep cleaning, while no equivalent arrangement exists on St. Croix.

Senator Kenneth Gittens raised the funding issue by asking whether BSCM had an imprest or petty-cash fund available for immediate needs.

Both the bureau's executive director and chief financial officer are stationed on St. Thomas. Chief Financial Officer Dr. Chairmaine Mayers explained how requests from St. Croix are handled.

"If there is any need...the assistant managers of maintenance would submit those quotes and we would provide a check."

Mr. Gittens questioned whether that arrangement amounted to meaningful access for the St. Croix district.

"I hope we see the games that's being played here," he stated. "Obviously there are no accessible imprest funds to these guys on St. Croix if there's [an] immediate need for spending. This tells me that they have to jump through loops for approval," Mr. Gittens said.

As Mayers attempted to explain why BSCM considered the \$5,000 fund insufficient, Mr. Gittens clarified his concern. "The amount wasn't the issue. It was the accessibility."

Committee Chairman Kurt Vialet also considered the amount inadequate. "That \$5,000 imprest fund is a joke for an entity of this magnitude." Mr. Vialet agreed that a "mechanism" should exist allowing Jayson Parrilla, who supervises BSCM operations on St. Croix, to access checks when needed.

Checkbook and Credit Card Remain on St. Thomas

Under the current arrangement, Mr. Parrilla and other BSCM leaders on St. Croix can purchase supplies through established accounts at hardware stores.

Executive Director Craig Benjamin said, however, that "we are utilizing so many of the supplies that in no time, it's depleting."

Because no one on St. Croix is authorized to write checks, Mr. Benjamin said he often has to "step in" and pay for additional items by telephone using the bureau's credit card.

Mr. Benjamin is the only person authorized to use that card.

Mr. Gittens again urged BSCM to "get this fixed." He maintained that the bureau's St. Croix leadership should have direct access to money for necessary purchases. Senator Dwayne DeGraff agreed.

With the checkbook and credit card both located on St. Thomas, Mr. Vialet called on BSCM to establish a system that works for both districts.

“Because all of the management positions are literally on St. Thomas. So then access to funds and everything has become difficult,” he observed.

“St. Croix need to have access to monies to fix stuff without having to call St. Thomas for minor stuff,” Mr. Vialet added.

He reminded Dr. Mayers that BSCM itself determines who is authorized to sign checks. Currently, only Dr. Mayers and Mr. Benjamin hold that authority.

“You make that determination, and you have to reconcile and hold people accountable,” Mr. Vialet stated.

Senator Carla Joseph said the bureau already has the managerial authority necessary to make the change.

“This is all about management and being able to manage money. That's all it is. So you can implement,” she told BSCM’s leadership.

Senator Novelle Francis Jr. urged the bureau to “minimize the bureaucracy.”

He said St. Croix and St. John should not continue to “be in a position as an afterthought.”

St. Thomas Has Quarterly Deep-Cleaning Contract; St. Croix Does Not

The difficulty accessing funds was not the only disparity identified during the hearing.

Lawmakers learned that BSCM has an annual contract providing quarterly deep cleaning at schools on St. Thomas, while no comparable contract exists for St. Croix schools.

Instead, St. Croix District Superintendent Bastian-Knight had to submit a request to BSCM’s St. Croix leadership to arrange deep cleaning of schools during the summer break.

She told Mr. Vialet that the last deep cleaning was conducted “last summer.” The difference between the districts drew criticism from the committee chairman.

“That's where St. Croix really always feel that we are totally neglecting. You got four quarterly on St. Thomas and zero on St. Croix,” he lamented. “You can’t do two and two?” he asked.

BSCM officials promised to revisit the contracts.

Mr. Vialet said a review was necessary because “custodians are responsible to clean the school, but in the St. Thomas district, you have custodians plus you have [a] deep cleaning contract.”

He warned that “at some point, it got to stop.”