

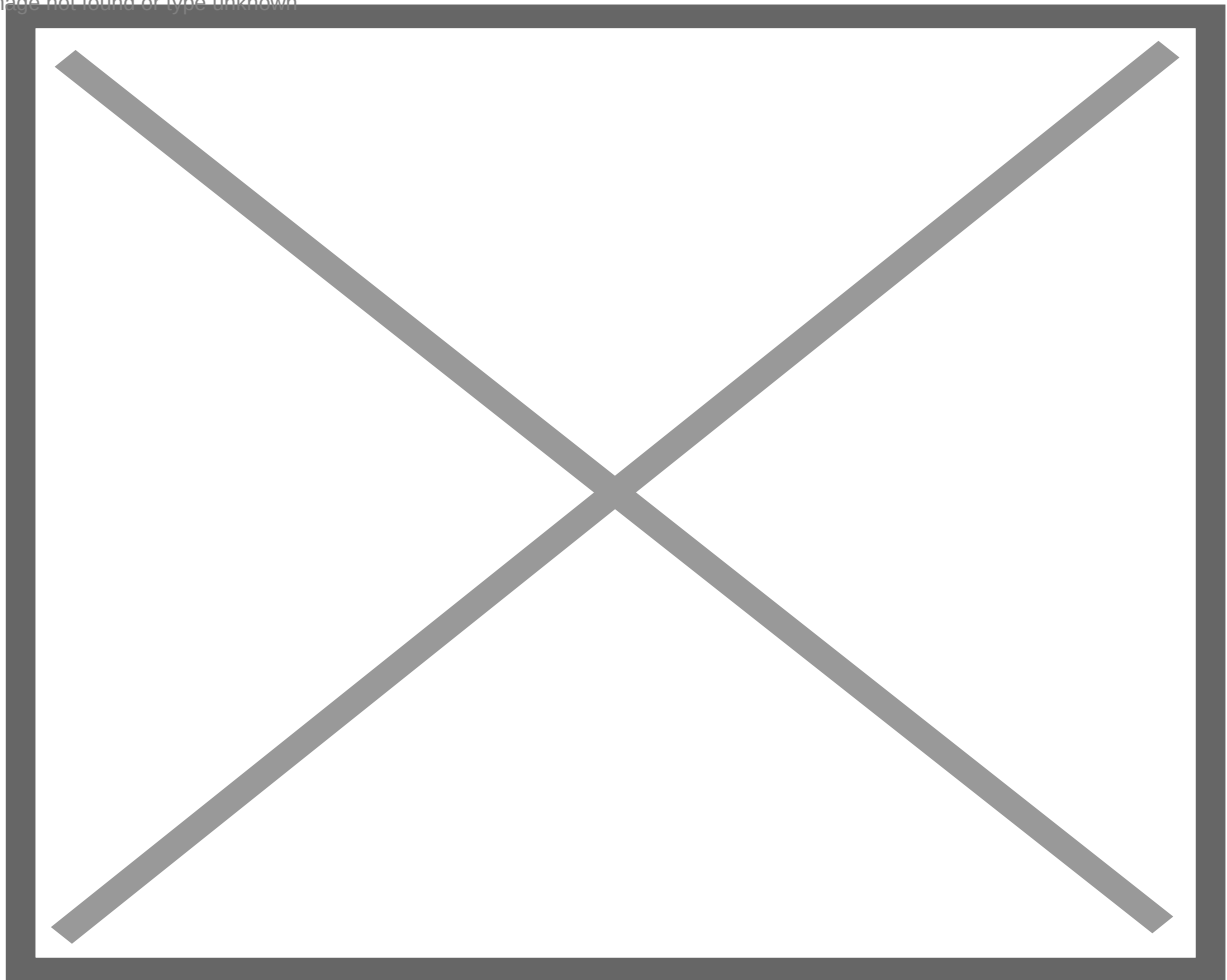
\$2M in Managerial Titles, Just \$13K Uncommitted: Lawmakers Blast BSCM's Top-Heavy Structure

With only \$13,058.77 left uncommitted, lawmakers questioned BSCM's heavy reliance on contractors, uneven skilled-trade staffing and more than \$2 million tied to managerial titles. Gittens says the bureau's structure is increasingly difficult to justify.

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BSCM Chief Executive Officer Craig Benjamin, second from right, sits with Bureau and V.I. Department of Education leaders during Monday's Senate hearing on school maintenance, staffing and funding. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

The Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance says only \$13,058.77 remains uncommitted from its two primary funding sources after more than \$15.7 million was spent or committed, even

as HVAC installations, playgrounds, leaking roofs, plumbing deficiencies and other long-term needs remain unresolved at schools across the territory.

The disclosure fueled renewed criticism Wednesday from members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, including Senator Kenneth Gittens, who again promised to seek the bureau's dissolution and return its functions to the V.I. Department of Education during the upcoming budget markup process.

BSCM Chief Executive Officer Craig Benjamin appeared before lawmakers to provide an overview of summer maintenance work nearly a month into the new school year. He said the "specific work performed varied by school, based on facility conditions, operational priorities, health and safety considerations, and available resources."

Across both districts, the bureau completed projects including restroom renovations, painting, power washing, electrical work and roofing repairs. But testimony also revealed a substantial list of longer-term projects still awaiting funding or completion.

Among the most persistent concerns are HVAC systems. New or improved air-conditioning facilities are needed at Lockhart K-8 School, the Charlotte Amalie High School auditorium, Ivanna Eudora Kean High School gymnasium, Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, and the cafeterias at Ricardo Richards Elementary and Alfredo Andrews Elementary, among other facilities.

At Pearl B. Larsen Pre K-8 School and St. Croix Central High School, HVAC equipment has already been purchased, but "installation remains pending funding," Mr. Benjamin testified.

BSCM Chief Financial Officer Dr. Charmaine Mayers said money received by the bureau had already been committed to "supply contracts," while an "extensive amount of emergencies" consumed resources that otherwise could have been used for installation.

Playgrounds also remain to be installed at Ulla F. Muller Elementary, Joseph A. Gomez Elementary, Joseph Sibilly Elementary and Lew Muckle Elementary. Kitchen exhaust hoods are non-functional at several schools, including Jane E. Tuitt Elementary and Joseph A. Gomez Elementary.

Those projects will be addressed "once the funding allows," Mr. Benjamin said.

Vialet Questions \$200,000 Playground Installation Costs

Senator Kurt Vialet questioned why BSCM's own employees could not install playground equipment rather than relying on contractors.

Mr. Benjamin responded that "it takes engineering to install a playground. You have to design the site. You have to make sure the site can drain properly."

With the bureau's engineer present at Wednesday's hearing, Sen. Vialet remained unconvinced.

"People learn to do stuff...What are we going to do? Pay \$200,000 to install playgrounds?" he asked.

Mr. Benjamin responded that this is "normally what they cost."

Beyond HVAC and playground needs, schools continue to face roof leaks, plumbing deficiencies, aging windows and electrical upgrades.

Mr. Benjamin told senators that BSCM's ability to continue maintenance and rehabilitation is "directly connected to the availability of adequate and timely financial resources."

Between its Settlement Fund and BSCM Capital Fund, the bureau reported just \$13,058.77 in uncommitted money. It has either spent or committed \$15,723,556.51 toward projects, contracts and other obligations.

Sen. Violet argued that repeatedly injecting additional money into the bureau without reducing costs is unsustainable.

"You got \$2.1 million in June. That money disappeared quickly because we had so much contracts that needed to be paid. So we can't continue to just give money, and then it's just a bunch of contractors," he said.

Staffing Imbalance Limits In-House Work

Mr. Benjamin also argued that BSCM needs adequate personnel to perform more work internally, although the bureau reported only one vacancy overall. He said operational capacity is constrained by how workers are distributed among skilled trades and other critical functions.

BSCM employs nine laborers on St. Croix but only one in the St. Thomas-St. John District. St. Croix has one air-conditioning technician, while two are assigned to St. Thomas-St. John — but one of those employees is currently on leave.

Mr. Benjamin said that situation "significantly limits BSCM's current in-house capacity to address air conditioning failures..." requiring the bureau to supplement its workforce with "specialized contracted services" when money is available.

The technician has been on paid leave for approximately four months following an incident Sen. Violet characterized as "possibly illegal."

The senator urged BSCM to resolve the matter, "because somebody getting paid [for something] that resulted in the destruction of government property, the destruction of a truck and the loss of all equipment for HVAC."

"I don't understand how this type of behavior could take place, and then somebody is getting paid for four months and holding up a critical position that you need for the island district of St. Thomas," Sen. Violet said, calling the situation an "embarrassment."

Senators Question Whether Bureau is Too Top-Heavy

The staffing disparities renewed an earlier concern among lawmakers that BSCM may have too many administrators and managers relative to employees performing maintenance work.

The bureau reported 53 employees actively engaged in maintenance and rehabilitation activities and 17 administrative positions.

"Are we building a bureau of project managers, people who manage contracts, or are we building a bureau capable of maintaining our schools?" Senator Marise James asked.

She argued that “the regular man and woman who works hard to get the work done every day, they're the ones underpaid.”

Senator Novelle Francis similarly questioned whether BSCM is “truly aligned for success,” noting that even among the 53 maintenance and rehabilitation positions are several managerial roles.

“Within this line of work, due to this situation that we're in, we have to be able to multitask,” Mr. Benjamin responded.

Dr. Mayers acknowledged the imbalance in laborers between districts and told Senator Milton Potter that the bureau was trying to address it.

BSCM is “working towards that, but with the funding constraint that we have, we can't hire anyone,” she said.

Mr. Benjamin cautioned, however, that simply adding employees would not resolve the bureau's challenges. Without “sufficient resources for materials, equipment, supplies, replacement components, and necessary contract services,” he said, more staffing would not “eliminate the maintenance backlog or significantly improve completion times.”

Gittens Again Calls for BSCM to Be Dissolved

Much of Wednesday's hearing reflected lawmakers' continuing frustration with the bureau's structure and performance.

Sen. Gittens, who has previously threatened to dismantle BSCM, reiterated that position while questioning whether its administrative costs are producing sufficient benefits.

He said the number of administrative positions is “difficult to justify without seeing the true benefits of this Bureau.”

“Y'all realize that we're paying clear more than \$2 million in about 23 positions just with these managerial titles?” he asked his colleagues. “And we wondering where's the monies. This is just crazy to me.”

Sen. Gittens said he intends to act during the Legislature's budget deliberations.

“I am definitely pushing for this Bureau to be dissolved and placed under the Department of Education. Something got to give.”