

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Startling Disparities Between Public Works Locations In F'sted And C'sted, Angry F'sted Workers Speak Out

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When you drive through the open gates of the Frederiksted unit of the Department of Public Works, you're immediately struck by the barren and desolate landscape that is sprawled before you. The large, open space has a beige-colored, medium-sized building tucked away to the right. The building's peeling and fading paint is evident from a distance. Patches of dry grass shoot through the graveled ground.

There is no indication you have arrived at an official government building, other than for the fading and peeling "Dept. of Public Works Frederiksted" wording scrawled across the front of the building.

On the left, three vehicles are parked--two of them rusted and inoperable; the other--a small dump truck. According to the employee with whom the *VI Consortium* spoke, that is the "only piece of heavy equipment" the eight-member crew at the site have been left with to do their jobs. Because, he said, everything else have either been taken to the Christiansted branch and never returned or sent over to St. Thomas for repairs and never returned.

With his frustrations visibly boiling over, the employee said, "If you go to Christiansted, it's a class A building; when you come to Frederiksted, it's class Z--the last in the alphabet, and that's wrong."

He continued: "To my knowledge, we are one Public Works. Why address one better than the next? We all are one unit. You can't do for one and don't do for the next."

But the Frederiksted workers' story is not just about a paint job--these workers are upset because they feel ill-treated, looked down upon and isolated. Morale at the unit is low.

Dept. of Public Works, Frederiksted





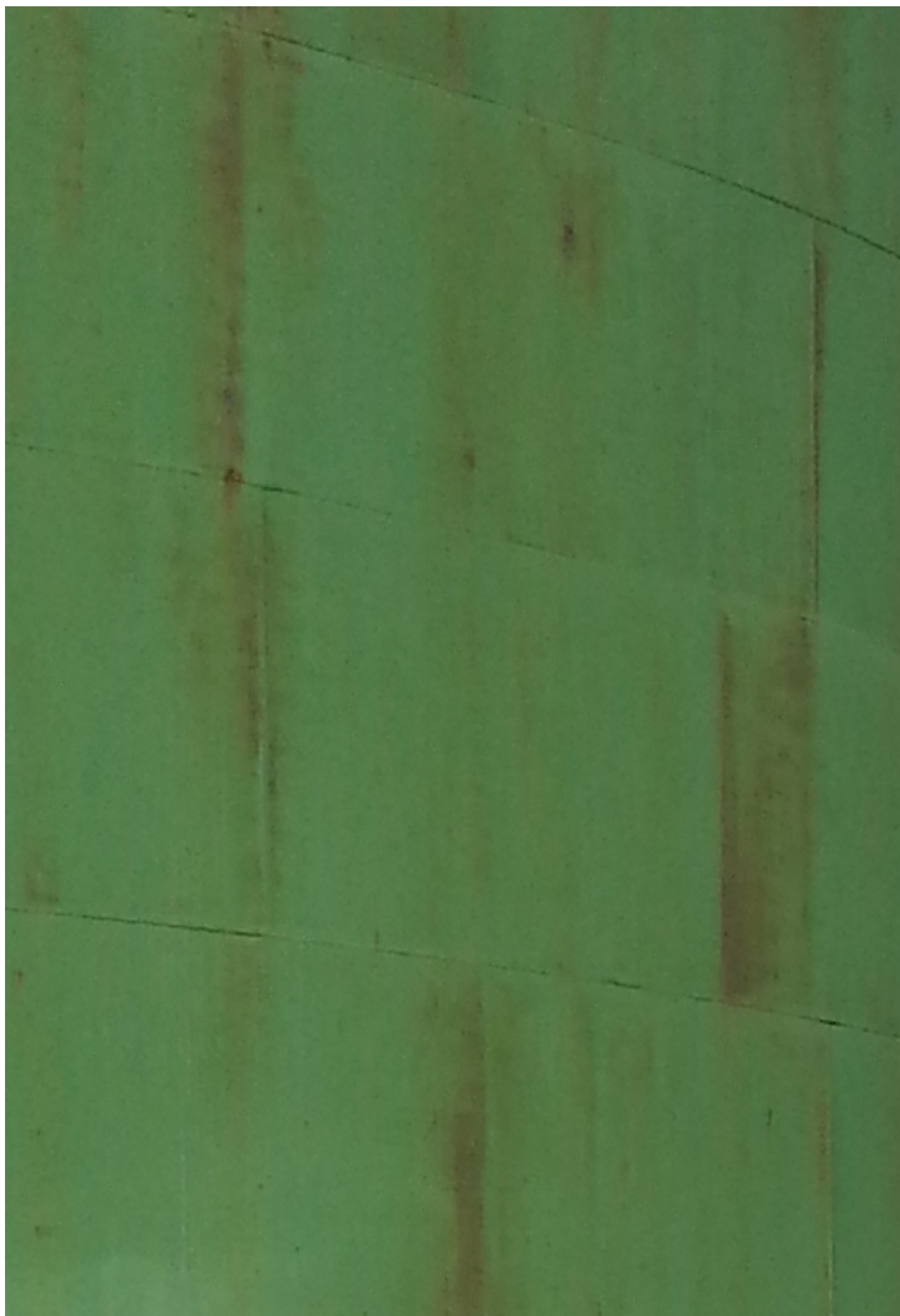






























Dept. of Public Works, Christiansted

The employee said things began deteriorating in Frederiksted two years ago when the workers there first reported a broken ice machine, a necessary appliance for their line of work that requires them to be in the sun for the bulk of the work day. From then, things got progressively worse, when in July of this year, much of their equipment began being transferred to the Christiansted unit.

"The ice machine has been down for a year and ten months, and Mr. Juan Bermudez, our supervisor, had been trying to get Darryl Smalls to purchase an ice machine," he said. The ice machine is still broken.

But, it's not just about having ice on the job to guard against heat strokes, the employee said: rather, he pointed out that it's about providing Frederiksted residents with the same of the island receive, something he and the other workers the loss of their equipment.



Dept. of Public Works, Christiansted -- heavy equipment

In describing the host of problems at the Frederiksted location, the employee said there have been recent break-ins at the facility, which he says is under the surveillance of working security cameras. However, he said no one monitors those cameras.

"They could find out [who broke in], but they don't bother to do it," he said. "They could go back in the camera to see who is doing this stuff, it's just that they don't care. Anything that has to do with Frederiksted, they don't care."

When pointing out some of the cracks, holes, peeling wood and other damage to the building, the employee again made reference to the Christiansted office.

"Look at our partition," he said, pulling at the broken wood, "in Christiansted, you will never see no inch of Public Works looking like this."

Then there was the water issue. The man, who has been a Public Works employee for eight years, said the Frederiksted workers had gone without drinking water at the facility

for an entire week, even after alerting management at the Christiansted office. It wasn't until he called OSHA that a single bottle of water was delivered to the Frederiksted location.

With that, he said he feels the deterioration of the building and the disappearing equipment is "a planned thing" Commissioner of Public Works Darryl Smalls "has been putting in the making from long because how could you ignore what you are supposed to be looking over?"

He continued: "We are one Public Works; if you spend there, you're supposed to spend here." He claimed that over the last eight years of Smalls' tenure, the roof at the Christiansted unit had been replaced three times, while "not one nail" has been used to renovate the Frederiksted building. He also said the building is in need of a new roof and electrical work.

The man pointed out that he and his colleagues come to work everyday, and they really want to work, but because they have no equipment to complete tasks, they sit around with little--and often, nothing--to do.

"Right about now, we have no machines and we are here everyday doing nothing," he lamented.

Not that there isn't work to do around Fredriksted, but having a single dump truck won't do, the man said.

"We've been telling them there is work to do in Frederiksted and we need our machines to do the work," he said. "Public Works has six backhoes--four in Christiansted and two in Fredriksted. All four of Christiansted's backhoes are broken down and could be fixed with or. If Darryl Smalls could get a radiator and fix one of the we could get back our new backhoe and do our work."



A small dump truck--the only piece of heavy equipment

available for use at the Frederiksted location

Furthermore, he said currently there are piles of branches littering Frederiksted's Marley Housing Community that are waiting to be picked up.

"If you drive around Marley right now, you'll find about four piles of branches, because every two or three weeks, we go down there and people would just throw the branches and pile it and we pick it up," he explained.

The man listed some of the other issues his unit has been unable to tackle on the western part of the island due to not having access to adequate equipment.

"The gutter rings in Frederiksted are poor and they have trees growing in the road, coming out of old houses that need to be cut down," he said, noting that management in Christiansted took his unit's chainsaw "about two or three weeks ago, and they never returned it." Not to mention there are overgrown trees and bushes covering important road signs, the employee said.

And, the Frederiksted workers have been left to fend for themselves without supervision. The employee said since Mr. Bermudez has been out on leave, another manger comes in, opens the building in the morning, and leaves for the remainder of the day.

With that, he says he fears a plan is being hatched to close the Frederiksted site by the end of the year, something he said is being talked about around the Department.

"For what? What about the people who live here? They don't need service, too," he asked.

If the unit does close, the employee said, he is unsure of his fate and that of the other workers.

"Now, how we come out [with our story], knowing [Smalls], he's going to be in a rage and try to get back at whomever, but I don't care. Enough is enough," the man said.

He then suggested that there should be two commissioners with two separate budgets, one each for the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John districts.

"Let the commissioner in St. Thomas deal with their budget and let the commissioner in St. Croix deal with our budget, that is one way we'll know our island will always prosper," he said. "This one-sided thing [needs to stop]."

Another employee vouched for his colleague's assessment of the conditions at the Department's Frederiksted location, and also provided some insight on the unsanitary conditions there.

"Ill-treatment, lack of water, lack of tools, lack of manpower and lack of caring, period," the employee said. "There isn't any toilet paper and nothing to wash your hands. It's like we don't exist."



Dept. of Public Works, Christiansted

When asked if they had filed their grievances with anyone, the first employee said he had placed numerous calls to upper management, his union president and some local senators. The man said only Sen. Nellie O'Reilly visited the site and listened to the employees' complaints.

On Friday, the same day the employees met with O'Reilly, the senator [issued a letter](#) to Commissioner Smalls regarding the workers' complaints and the conditions she observed at the Frederiksted site. In the letter, she stated that she was "extremely appalled at the disparate treatment between districts within the Department of Public Works." O'Reilly then listed the myriad of problems at the Department's Frederiksted location, and requested a meeting with Smalls and his management team on St. Croix.

At press time it was unknown if Smalls had responded to the senator's request.



Dept. of Public Works, Frederiksted

On Friday, the *VI Consortium* also visited the Christiansted office of the Department of Public Works to speak with Commissioner Smalls following our interview with the Frederiksted workers. This reporter observed a very different environment in stark contrast to what was observed at the Frederiksted location, including a well-manicured lawn, well-paved parking lots, palm-tree lined front lot, lush green grass, freshly painted buildings with new roofs, a fleet of company vehicles, heavy equipment, and more.

Smalls was away from his desk, but the *VI Consortium* managed to reach him by telephone later in the day. He said he was unavailable for an interview at that time, and would get back to the *VI Consortium*. At press time, the *VI Consortium* had not received a return call from Commissioner Smalls.

