

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Gustav James Says Public Works To Fix 'Deplorable' Road Conditions 'Immediately', Approved By Rules Committee

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Cynthia Graham **March 10, 2015**



In sworn testimony before the Senate Committee on Rules and Judiciary Monday at the Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room on St. Croix, Gustav James, Governor Kenneth Mapp's nomination for Commissioner of the Department of Public Works, said the department is committed to fixing the "deplorable" conditions of the territory's roadways and have begun several construction projects to that end.

"As the public is well aware, our roads here in the territory are in deplorable conditions. Our public works department is committed to addressing that problem immediately. We

are working to ensure that roads are properly constructed to meet the current and future demands," he said.

Albeit a temporary fix, James pointed to the patching of potholes in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John districts as projects currently underway to help make the territory's roads safer to traverse.

"We recognize that a pothole patch is a temporary measure, however we consider potholes a serious issue that impact the safety of motorists, and as such, we must continue to patch them until the proper road construction is implemented," he explained.

However, James went on to say that with the help of federal funds, the department is "embarking on several ambitious road projects" in both island districts.

"Of special note are the Melvin Evans Reconstruction Project on St. Croix and the Veterans Drive Improvement Project on St. Thomas," James said.

He pointed out that the St. Croix project is already underway and "will continue westward from the current location on the east airport road." James said the St. Thomas project is "intended to vastly improve the traffic conditions in Charlotte Amalie," adding that it will be completed with "over \$120 million of investment, the vast majority coming from the federal government of the United States." James did not specify the cost of the Melvin Evans project on St. Croix.

James said the territory receives about \$16 million annually in funding for its federal highways.

"This is an allotment, which is 40 percent of the \$40 million provided for the insular territories, not including Puerto Rico," he said.

However, James pointed out that the \$16 million represented a \$4 million cut from the amount previously allotted to the territory for the construction and maintenance of its highways.

"In the not too distant past, we received \$20 million annually, we are currently seeking, as a minimum, to return to that figure," he said.

James went on to say that the territory's "local roads are in even worse conditions than our federal highways," adding that the repair of the roads "must be addressed using local funding sources." He lamented the fact that "the gasoline tax revenues are no longer available for maintenance and construction of our local roads" and stressed that other funding sources must be identified.

The commissioner-designee went on to say there are other matters besides the territory's driving surfaces and drainage systems that require his department's attention.

"Within these road right of ways, we also need to provide safe sidewalks, and possibly bicycle paths. Our quality of life and the quality of life of our visitors are being severely impacted by these deficiencies," James said.

James also said he believed the government could "do a lot more with the resources we currently have than what we have been doing."

"We have a very willing and able workforce that welcomes the challenge to accomplish more," he said. "When properly equipped and led, our in-house staff would effectively maintain the roadways and perform small to medium construction jobs. With some investment in tools and equipment, we will begin to pave some smaller roadways using in-house personnel."

James said that by "challenging" his staff "not only will we be able to accomplish more work, more importantly, we will enhance the knowledge and skill level of our personnel."

With that, James gave voice to "a very important matter" he wished to bring to the Senate's attention.

"Some years ago, the V.I. Legislature raised the minimum pay of government workers to \$20,200 a year," he began. James said while he "fully supports that initiative," he is also in support of "another increase, if the Legislature saw fit."

He said the problem the government faces is that when the minimum wage was raised to \$20,000 annually, "the pay of the individuals that were already earning \$20,000 and in that neighborhood was not raised accordingly."

"Now," James continued, "we have our unskilled workers earning the same pay as our skilled workers. This is not a good circumstance. It does not help morale and it does not provide an incentive for our people to upgrade their skill set."

James said he has instructed his staff to remedy "the problem" in the department's 2016 budget, "and as soon as we have the budget space, I will be meeting with the impacted union to address the pay raise that the effective workers will receive."

Later, during questioning from committee members, James admitted he accepted a \$120,000 salary, which is up \$23,000 from former Commissioner Darryl Smalls salary that was \$97,000.

In concluding his testimony, James addressed the territory's finances, stating, "If we ask our public what's worse, our roads or our WAPA bills, I think we will get mixed returns. It is my opinion that our problems are solvable and that a number of solutions lie in good engineering practices."

The committee voted to send James' nomination for a final vote before the full Senate body later this week.

Rules also approved the nomination of Lawrence Olive to head the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, with six senators voting in favor of Olive's nomination and Sen. Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly opposing it.

*Feature Image: L to R: Gustav James, Facebook; severely damaged road in St. Croix's Sion Farm neighborhood.*

