The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Administration Rejects De Jongh's $202,832.60 Payment For Improvements At Personal Residence

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ST. THOMAS -- In a brief press conference held at Government at 10:00 a.m. this morning, Acting Attorney General Terri Griffiths revealed that the Kenneth Mapp administration has rejected former Governor John P. de Jongh's payment to the Government of the Virgin islands (GVI), through the Department of Property and Procurement (DPP), of $202,832.60, for the guard house and electric fence constructed at his residence after taking office in 2007.

The sum is less than half of the $500,000 of government monies used on de Jongh's residence in Estate Mafolie, but according to the former leader, who served two terms and was the 7th elected governor of the territory, the $202,831.60 is the appraised, fair market value of the guard house and fence built for security measures at his private home.

Griffiths, however, disagreed. The acting AG said at the press conference today that she wrote de Jongh a letter on Wednesday night, informing him that the $202,831.60 sum was being returned, because it was less than the $497,000.25 that the United States Inspector General concluded in a report was owed to the GVI.

"The primary concern was, and continues to be, that the funds were improperly redirected from public roadways to the security improvement of your personal residence," Griffiths wrote in her letter to the former governor.

Griffiths said a document, dated Dec. 19, 2014 that de Jongh forwarded to the Dept. of Property and Procurement, which, along with the check, was subsequently forwarded to the Department of Justice, suggests that he has no legal obligation to return the misappropriated funds. The acting AG added that the governor tried to justify the sum of $202,831.60, "based on a one-sided methodology, claiming depreciation and demolition costs of the improvements."

The letter added: "Your unilateral terms run afoul of the findings and opinion of the U.S. Inspector General's office, and further does nothing to bring your misuse of government's funds within the confines of the law."

Griffiths said the DOJ cannot excuse or compromise the total misappropriated funds that were redirected from the roadway funds to de Jongh's Estate Mafolie residence. She said the GVI must fully access the consequences of the former governor's conduct and the resulting loss to the government to include any amount of restitution that may be due as a result.

"Accordingly, we simply cannot accept your unilateral representation of your obligations to the government, and the Government of the Virgin Islands hereby returns your $202,831.60, check," Griffiths wrote.

Griffiths said she asked de Jongh to direct any further communications regarding the check and the security improvements to her, personally.

De Jongh took office in 2007, but instead of living at the Governor's mansion in Estate Catherineberg, he chose to reside at his private residence — where Public Works spent over $490,000 erecting a fence, building a guard house and installing a camera system. The project was given the green light after Public Works sought and received an opinion from the V.I. Attorney General's office, stating it was permissible to move ahead with the work once public interest was served and was the main reason for the expense.

But in 2010, the U.S. Interior Department inspector general's office concluded in a report that the renovations of de Jongh's private home with public funds, "usurped the Legislature's authority to determine how to spend public funds" and should be returned.

In his public statement, however, the governor recalled his version of the events that lead to him moving into his private home while serving as governor of the Virgin Islands.

“I was advised that to renovate Estate Catharineberg for a family would require well over a year of construction at an estimated cost in excess of $1.5 million… I also was informed that the estimated annual housing expenses to be incurred at Catharineberg would be $80,000 per year, which over the course of my eight year tenure as your Governor would have cost upwards of $640,000.

“Simply put, the costs associated with moving my family into Catharineberg would have meant an expenditure in excess of $2.1 million of taxpayer money. I did not consider the cost for such major renovations to the property, or the additional annual costs associated to be appropriate. And so I decided to remain at my personal residence,” said the former governor.

He added: “As I approached the end of my second term as Governor, the Department of Property and Procurement completed the established process for obtaining appraisals or valuations for public purposes. The amount reimbursed was based on the averaging of the appraised values presented by three independent, licensed appraisers commissioned by the Department of Property and Procurement. The value of the security measures was determined to be $222,631.60, and I accepted the valuation.”

But DPP Commissioner nominee Randolph L. Bennett, said his department did some research and found three appraisals that were never mentioned in de Jongh's letter, valuating the security improvements at his residence at above $300,000. One of the appraisals were conducted by an agent who works for John Forester Real Estate, according to Bennett. Another appraisal was conducted by Elissa Runyon, and a third by another St. Thomas firm with an average amount of $340,816.67 -- which is above the funds that de Jongh returned to Property and Procurement.