

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Mapp Administration Plans \$75 Million Major Road Projects In Territory, Bulk Of Money Going To St. Croix

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ST. THOMAS -- At a Committee on Finance hearing held at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall today, Commissioner nominee of the Department of Public Works (DPW), Gustav James, along with members of the Kenneth Mapp administration's financial team, announced a major undertaking in relation to the territory's roads called the Grant Revenue Vehicles (GRV).

The project will see the administration, through DPW, attempting to secure \$75 million from the federal government in funding, \$60 million of which would be spent on St. Croix's roads, as the team agreed that the bigger of the three islands has much more repair and rebuilding work to be done compared to St. Thomas and St. John.

But the hearing of bill No. 31-0073 wasn't without friction, as senators from the St. Thomas-St. John district wanted a 50/50 split for a Veteran's Drive (Waterfront) project they said has been lying dormant for over 20 years.

Sen. Kurt Vialet, freshman Democrat from St. Croix, bucked.

Vialet first attempted to quell the St. Thomas senators' concern about funds not being available for the Veterans Drive project if the funding was split 55/45 in favor of St. Croix, referencing a memorandum of understanding that was agreed upon in the original bill.

The freshman senator then cited a study that covered the territory's roads, which concluded that the roads on St. Croix were in much dire need of repairs than those on St. Thomas on St. John. Vialet also highlighted past projects where most of the funding was allocated to the St. Thomas-St. John district. He then forcefully drove home his point.

"As we were going through some of the testimony, I kept on hearing this reference back to how we're going to split X,Y, and Z, and a lot of times the split was so unfair in the past. But now that there's an attempt to equalize or receive some kind of parity, all of a sudden we need 50/50," Vialet said with passion.

Vialet went on, adding that St. Croix is way behind in economic development. He referenced a recent hearing where the promotion of St. Croix as a tourism product was being pitched, and how St. Thomas senators again doubted the viability of the big island, questioning the impact of the proposal.

"What was the impact when HOVENSA was pouring monies into the [St. Thomas] economy," Vialet argued. "What is the impact now that we're utilizing the rum company funds to float bonds for projects on St. Thomas," he went on. "But every time there's something for St. Croix, there's some type of discussion."

Vialet said there's no way St. Croix will grow "unless some special attention is paid to it."

The Mapp administration's agreement with the Federal Highway Administration, the agency providing the GRV funds, allows the local government to spend \$16 million of its local dollars in debt services, which would allow the \$75 million to stretch to \$100 million according James. This makes the first phase of the Veteran's Drive project that St. Thomas senators lobbied to be added to the measure a reality (total cost is \$110 million), while the remaining \$60 million would be allocated for road work on St. Croix.

Sen. Sammuel Sanes used his 6 minutes to backup Vialet's rebuttal of the St. Thomas senators. And Sen. Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly likened the situation to two birds that are willing to share pieces from the same bread, hailing the 31st Legislature as a new day for St. Croix, even as she compromised St. Croix's portion of the funds, moving from \$60 million to \$55 million, "because it's that important to me that this happens," Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Rivera-O'Reilly rolled back the curtain to 2001 when, she said, the first set of bonds were floated. The lawmaker recalled that 100 percent of the money was spent on St. Thomas and St. John. The St. Croix independent senator also reminded the Senate of legislation passed in the 30th Legislature in 2014 that allocates \$700,000 annually for 30 years,

coming from the St. Croix rum cover-over funds for the University of the Virgin Island's medical school to be built on St. Thomas. "That's \$20 million dollars," Rivera-O'Reilly said, exhaling a stressful sigh as she made those remarks.

But the committee's chairman, Sen. Clifford Graham, insisted on St. Thomas getting at least half of the funds from Public Works' massive undertaking of rebuilding the territory's roads.

Sen. Justin Harrigan Sr. of St. Thomas echoed Graham, agreeing with the notion that St. Thomas should be treated equally in relation to the allocation of the funds.

"You know, I cringed when I heard that 100 percent of the funds were going St Thomas," Harrigan said. "I try to devoid myself of such conversations, but it hurts me a little bit to hear my colleague of the other side numerate all of those projects and say that they're being left out."

In the end, the bill was passed after amendments that saw St. Croix receiving \$55 million instead of the proposed \$60 million out of the \$75 million. All 7 committee members voted yes. They included: Sen. Graham, Sen. Violet, Sen. Sanes, Sen. Myron D. Jackson, Sen. Marvin Blyden, Sen. Terrence "Positive" Nelson and Sen. Tregenza A. Roach.

The bill will now head to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for its ratification.