

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sen. Novelle Francis, Community Members Express Hiring Concerns Over DeChabert Demolition Project

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ST. CROIX -- At a town hall meeting organized by the Virgin Islands Housing Authority (VIHA) on Saturday, residents of communities neighboring the abandoned Ralph deChabert Housing Community gathered at the Juanita Gardine School auditorium to receive pertinent information about the project, which has been contracted to Puerto Rican company RG Engineering Inc.

But after a presentation was given by RG Engineering's sales manager, Jose M. Robles, in which Robles explained thoroughly details of the upcoming project, attendees, including Senator Novelle Francis, shared concerns about hiring, and whether local employment was a priority.

We know that we're dying at the roots, and it's important that we have some of that money circulating right here in the St. Croix economy. - Sen. Novelle Francis, Jr.

"I'm very concerned because if we look at tradition, when these out-of-Virgin Islands companies come here, they take the lion's share of the funding back to their community," Sen. Novelle Francis, Jr. told *The Consortium*. "In this instance we're seeing where Puerto Rico will be benefiting from this, more so than the Virgin Islands economy."

A local company placed a bid for the contract [but failed](#) in winning the board's approval.

During his presentation, Robles said the first phase of the work, which includes the removal of asbestos and lead from the structure, will be performed by its own specialists, and not locals.

Retired track coach Eurman Fahie, also present at the town hall, said VIHA could have made moves to train locals so they'd be ready to work from beginning to end. Lydia Hughes, chief operating officer at VIHA, said there are four more projects in the pipeline, and that VIHA will take Fahie's recommendation into consideration.

But locals will be employed, Robles said, as federal mandates must be adhered to, one of which being the hiring of [Section 3](#) individuals as a priority, and RG Engineering has been provided with a list of the candidates. Hughes, however, made a point of clarifying who qualify as a section 3 individual, reminding the audience that said person must live in public housing and must be on the lease of the property.

Even so, Sen. Francis said he wanted to ensure that local contractors receive their share of the monies that will be disseminated.

"I wanted to ensure that our local subcontractors be given a piece of the pie and that some of the money remains in the local community," the freshman St. Croix Democrat said. "And it's something that we will continue to champion because I think it's important that we grow this economy, especially here on St. Croix. We know that we're dying at the roots, and it's important that we have some of that money circulating right here in the St. Croix economy."

According to Robles, job postings, once the Section 3 requirement has been satisfied, will be posted on the Department of Labor's website, and on a Facebook page that will soon be created. For applications, a RG Engineering field officer will be available for pickups on Thursdays at 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., and a mailbox will be available where applications as well as resumes will be deposited.

Drug screening and testing shall be performed for specialized tasks.

Feature Image: From left: VIHA Director of Modernization Darryl Smalls, VIHA's Chief Operating Officer Lydia Hughes and Jose M. Robles, Sales Manager at RG Engineering.