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Blaming His Predecessor for STEP Program Problems, Bryan Says Mapp Left a 'Diabolical Mess' Behind

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Governor Bryan, center, and former Governor Kenneth Mapp, left, during Mr. Bryan's inauguration ceremony in January 2019 By. VI CONSORTIUM

Governor Albert Bryan on Thursday used fighting words to cast blame on his predecessor, former Governor Kenneth Mapp for problems facing the \$766 million Sheltering & Temporary Essential Power (STEP) Program, stating that Mr. Mapp left behind a "diabolical mess."

The blame-casting comes amid [a Congressional investigation](#) being initiated by U.S. Senator John Kennedy that will seek to learn why U.S. subcontractors owed hundreds of millions of dollars have yet to be paid in full after performing work in the territory almost two years ago. These companies, which uprooted their workforce and brought them to the territory to help rebuild after

Hurricanes Irma and Maria, paid upfront costs such as salaries, stipends, hotel stay, transportation and more, with the promise of payment from the Government of the Virgin Islands. Companies from Louisiana, the state Mr. Kennedy represents, are going bankrupt. Other states such as Texas and Gulf states face similar plights.

"We have been working on this diabolical mess created by the Mapp administration for the last year," Mr. Bryan said during his coronavirus response update press event. "So any help that we're getting, Kennedy or whoever wants to have an investigation, you know, let them have an investigation. One of the things that is causing this is because it was just not really handled well and now we're paying the price for that."

Mr. Bryan did not return multiple requests for comment to bring clarity to his stance.

The man who currently leads the territory's STEP program is Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority Director, Daryl Griffith. Mr. Griffith, however, is the same person who was at the helm during the Mapp administration.

According to Mr. Griffith, the local government still owes \$366 million. An additional \$150 million in construction soft costs is being contested by FEMA.

During an exclusive interview with the Consortium Wednesday, David Stokes, Mr. Kennedy's chief of staff, said the investigation will summon the Government of the Virgin Islands, Witt O'Brien's, The Strategy Group — a subcontractor of Witt O'Brien's which is owned by Mr. Bryan's campaign manager during the 2018 general election, John Engerman — AECOM, APTIM and others. A committee of jurisdiction was still being determined, Mr. Stokes said.

"Senator Kennedy is going to in the coming weeks formally call for a congressional investigation," said Mr. Stokes. He said "all the entities that had been involved with the USVI program" will be summoned. "That will include the island, all the prime contractors, APTIM, AECOM, TSG, Witt O'Brien's. There may be some that I've left out but they're going to all be brought to the table to give an account of why payments have taken so long and FEMA will also be included in this."

"There's been too much finger-pointing, and all the while Louisiana businesses are slowly going bankrupt waiting for payment from work they did almost two years. And it's not just Louisiana, it's Texas and a number of Gulf states that have businesses that can't get paid. So this is Senator Kennedy's way to let the truth come out, whatever that truth may be, to make sure that Louisiana companies get the money they were promised when they rushed down to help the islands after the hurricanes," Mr. Stokes said.

He added that all of the parties involved were being informed of the investigation. The V.I. government was also asked to inform its partners.

Mr. Stokes said some payments were made late last year after Mr. Kennedy applied pressure. However, progress has stopped. "Since that time things have come to a grinding halt, and we just don't have the time anymore to sort through all of that; we need to be able to get our guys paid now. It's way overdue and we can't afford to lose anymore Louisiana jobs because entities aren't keeping up their end of the bargain."

Mr. Stokes added, "They performed all of their work, they played by the rules and now they're going bankrupt waiting for payment for work they did going on two years ago."

The remaining invoices totaling \$336 million are projected to be submitted to FEMA by the end of May, said Mr. Griffith during a Senate Committee of the Whole hearing Wednesday. Those invoices were for projects completed on April 15, 2019 — one year and one month ago. Mr. Griffith said it took a while to reconcile the invoices because of the scope of the project, which was roughly \$800 million. Another reason was quality control of the invoices, Mr. Griffith said.

"The territory first had to receive the invoices from the contractors and the contractors did take a while to put their invoices together, and we worked collaboratively with them on that," Mr. Griffith said. Once the invoices were received, Mr. Griffith said V.I.H.F.A. had to make sure they were aligned with FEMA's requirements and regulations.

But the submittal of invoices to FEMA does not mean that payments will be immediately made to contractors owed. FEMA has to first approve the invoices. Mr. Griffith said he was not expecting any issues with the latest submittals.