

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Estate New Works, Profit and Bethlehem Residents Urged To Attend DPNR's Red Dust Public Meeting

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ST. CROIX -- Residents of Estate New Works, Profit and Bethlehem are being asked to attend a public meeting that the Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Dawn L. Henry has organized, "in order to solicit comments and concerns from the community on the Red Mud Remediation Work being conducted at the St. Croix Renaissance site," according to a press release DPNR issued on Tuesday.

"We are especially urging those residents in the Estate New Works, Profit and Bethlehem areas to come out to this meeting and voice their concerns as well as to hear what the department has been doing in this regard," Henry said.

The meeting will be held on Thursday, September 24 from 6-8 p.m. at the University of the Virgin Islands' Great Hall on the St. Croix Campus. All interested persons are invited to attend, and can contact Norman Williams, Jr., director of Environmental Protection at (340) 773-1082 for more information.

[In February](#), residents of the Estate Profit, Harvey, Clifton Hill and New Works neighborhoods here gathered at Flamboyant Restaurant in Estate Profit for a similar meeting. There, residents said they were sick and tired. Tired of literally being sick, and sick of feeling like their complaints were being ignored.

The event was a Q&A session with St. Croix Administrator Stephanie Williams and Magdalene Morancie, then-acting director of the Div. of Environmental Protection for the DPNR.

"We have a health problem here. We have a lot of people that get sick. We invite the health department to come today and I don't see them here, either," said Eric Ortiz, a community leader who helped organize event.

He continued, "People in this community are tired, sick of false promises and nothing has been done. And who to blame here is DPNR, they are the ones that are supposed to monitor these companies and make sure they are in compliance. We are not leaving this community. We live in this community and we are going to stand up for this community."

As Ortiz indicated, this was not the first time the frustrated residents met with the appropriate officials in an effort to demand that something be done about what they say have been a constant flow of dust — first red and now white — that they and their families have been subjected to. They say the dust piles up on their roofs, on their furniture, inside their homes, in their cisterns...and on them.

One Estate Profit resident, Yolanda Melendez, recounted an incident that had recently took place, when she and her husband witnessed a thick plume of white dust wafting into the night air.

"When I came outside [on my porch] I heard the machines working at night. When we look up in the air, all you could see is white," Melendez said.

She continued,"In the morning when I get up, I have pictures from my car, my porch, my house—all white. That's when I called [DPNR] and I made my complaint."

Her voice quivering with emotion, Melendez, who first contacted *VI Consortium* about the red dust that had been [plaguing her neighborhood last October](#), added, "I'm tired. I live there and I'm so tired of what's going on."

The white dust Melendez is referring to comes from the caleche being used to cover and contain the red dust that has been at the heart of the residents' problems. The cover up is being done as a result of a court-ordered federal Consent Decree issued to clean up the site, most commonly known as Anguilla, which is a now-defunct alumina refinery where bauxite ore was processed for alumina extraction and where residues from the process were deposited.

The refinery was constructed in the mid-1960s and alumina refining operations began in 1968. In its hay day, the refinery consisted of a number of buildings and structures necessary for its operation, including areas to dispose of bauxite residue, or red mud.

The site has changed owners a number of times over the years and is currently under the ownership of St. Croix Renaissance Group, LLLP (SCRG), who purchased it in 2002 from Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA). SCRG has since initiated efforts to convert it to a mixed-use industrial-commercial site.

St. Croix Alumina, LLC, a subsidiary of ALCOA, was the last owner that operated the site as an alumina refinery when the company purchased it in 1995 from VIALCO. Refining operations were suspended from 1995 to 1998, but resumed in 1998 up until Dec. 2000.

But decades of alumina refining took its toll on the natural resources and environment at the site and surrounding neighborhoods. About three years ago, then-Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Alicia Barnes, in her capacity as trustee of natural resources, along with the Government of the Virgin Islands, filed a class-action suit in federal District Court on St. Croix against the previous owners of the site when it operated as a refinery in *Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Alicia Barnes, in her capacity as trustee for natural resources of the territory of the United States Virgin Islands, and the Government of the U. S. Virgin Islands v. Century Aluminum Company, et al.*

On Feb. 16, 2012, District Court Judge Harvey Bartle issued a federal Consent Decree under which the defendants were required to perform corrective action on the site. Phase A, which is closest to the residential neighborhoods, is underway.

The community demands more

Many at the February meeting complained of the water in their cisterns being unusable, as some cisterns have been condemned due to the red sediments in them. As a result, families, many of them low-income, have been forced to purchase water, which poses a serious hardship, according to one resident.

One man complained of his wife being hospitalized with breathing problems due to the dust. Another woman said her son has been in and out of the hospital with bronchitis and a sinus infection, causing him to miss countless days of school. She said this is the case with many children living in the affected neighborhoods. Another woman said children are often kept indoors, with windows closed, affecting their quality of life.

Andy Williams said two of his daughters have “suffered” as a result of the dust blowing into his home. He wanted to know, however, if the site owners would compensate homeowners for the pain and suffering they have endured over the years.

There were countless of these stories.

Leon Cruz, another community leader, asked Morancie why DPNR had responded to residents’ complaints about the white dust only days ago.

“We have recognized the impact to the residents from the time we began receiving complaints. I won’t say that it is a correct statement to say that we only addressed it a

few days ago. Back in October, following a number of complaints that we had received, we did issue some corrective actions to the contractors to mitigate the issues that were being addressed within the community,” Morancie said.

She further explained that placement of the caleche was only expected to last for another five to six weeks.

“We do recognize the concerns; we are cognizant of them. We are working with the contractors to ensure they are taking mitigative efforts with respect to dust control,” she said.

Morancie pointed out that with every new phase of the federally mandated project, certain problems arise, such as if contractors “are driving over the red dust more or there has been a pick-up in the wind.” She said whenever those “circumstances have happened, the department have always required that the contractors implement corrective action to address it.”

Last October, Morancie said when the stockpiles of caleche were too high, DPNR “ordered” the contractor “to cut back on the size of the caleche, increase the watering when they are doing the work, as well as requiring that they apply a tackifier over the piles of caleche, and what that does is it forms a crust, so as long as it’s not in use and they’re not processing it, it should not be carried away by the wind to affect the residents.”

But residents want more to be done.

They suggested that if winds are high, as they have been over the last few weeks, DPNR should shut down the project altogether until conditions are favorable again. Furthermore, residents want their cisterns to be cleaned, and they want assistance in purchasing water for their homes until their cisterns are made usable again. DPNR officials say they would take the suggestions into consideration.

The day before the Q&A meeting, DPNR officials, accompanied by Williams, the St. Croix administrator, and Mapp administration official, Frankie Johnson, toured neighborhood homes to assess the effects of the dust on the properties. Melendez told *VI Consortium* later that day that DPNR assured her they would make moves to have her cistern cleaned.

Phase A of the project is expected to be completed in June, Morancie said. Phase B will begin thereafter.

The meeting was the first residents have had with officials in the Mapp administration and Ortiz says he is hopeful the relief the communities he represent have wanted for so long will finally be realized.