The Virgin Islands Consortium

Over 80 Funded Capital Projects Have Yet to Start Territory-Wide; Vialet Calls on Bryan to 'Put Fire Behind Your Commissioners'

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The government of the Virgin Islands has yet to start work on more than half of capital projects that have already been funded, a reality that caused senators to criticize Bryan administration officials — among them head of the Dept. of Finance and the Public Finance Authority, Kirk Kirk Callwood — who testified on Wednesday in the Senate Committee on Finance on the PFA'S and D.O.F.'s budget proposals.

Senator Janelle Sarauw first pointed out the large number of projects on which work had yet to commence even though funding was already secured.

"One hundred and fifty-eight capital projects and I counted 81 capital projects where we have expended zero dollars," Ms. Sarauw said. "That's more than half of the total amount of capital projects, and this is not even tied to FEMA funds. So you can't blame FEMA; you can't give any excuse of the pandemic. What is the difficulty and delay in moving capital projects?" she asked. "Eight pages of capital projects and you're just seeing zero expended. Have we reached out to the departments and agencies? What is the dilemma?"

Mr. Callwood said the commencement of work on capital projects is the responsibility of each department and agency and the leaders thereof. He said government arms provide quarterly reports on progress to the PFA, but thereafter the onus is on said department or agency. "That compliance lie at the agency level," Mr. Callwood said.

Ms. Sarauw, however, said while she understood where responsibility rests, Mr. Callwood has an obligation to hold these agency and department heads to task. "You have to go back to the governor; you have to sit in your financial meetings and you have to sit in your cabinet meetings and say, 'listen, we have a problem,'" Ms. Sarauw, who chairs the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, said.

She added, "We can't send a budget here and say we don't have any money when you have 81 capital projects [and] zero [dollars] expended. That means zero Corporate Income Tax. That means zero Individual Income Tax — that means zero Gross Receipt Taxes. That's the math. And then I don't want to hear the excuse that we can't find people to work because nothing is connecting." Ms. Sarauw spoke about an apprenticeship program at the Department of Labor that calls for training of youth to equip them with skills for a myriad of tasks — among them work in the construction industry. Those same individuals, after being trained, could be placed in the workforce, she said.

Senator Kurt Vialet, the powerful Committee on Finance chair, reminded that Governor Albert Bryan is the chairman of the PFA board. "Does he see all these zeroes? Therefore you need to put some fire behind your commissioners," Mr. Vialet said, a statement apparently directed to the governor through his representatives at the hearing Wednesday.

Mr. Vialet, a former lifelong educator who served as principal at multiple schools, also pointed to funds repurposed since last year to the Dept. of Education for school maintenance. Those funds, however, have yet to be spent.

"Act 8193," he began, setting the stage for his forthcoming statement. "This body reprogrammed $5,068,184 to the Dept. of Education for over 40 projects that relates to school maintenance. Out of that $5,068,184, they have spent $38,000. This is from last year and school is coming back in August again. I just want to know if nobody has a sense of urgency when it comes to these areas?"

D.O.F.'s 2021 budget proposal is $18,779,059. This includes $14,942,542, or 79 percent of the budget in "other services and charges;" $307,600 in capital outlay; $2,363,380 in personnel costs; and roughly $1 million in fringe benefits.

The PFA's 2021's budget proposal seeks $10 million, representing an 18 percent increase of $1.5 million to the PFA's 2020 budget. "This increase is due primarily to the increased funding for building repairs and maintenance, including repairs to the facilities, painting, mold remediation, and air conditioning system maintenance; upgrades to our IT infrastructure and website maintenance; upgrades to our integrated financial management system; and anticipated increases in communications, supplies, and rent at the St. Croix Office," said Mr. Callwood.