

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Elena Christian Junior High Ravaged By Vandals As Promise To Repair Fades

Education / **Published On August 21, 2016 12:02 PM /**

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ST. CROIX -- Senators who sit on the Committee on Finance on Monday [listened to Mapp administration officials](#) make their case for pursuing a straightforward loan of \$55 million for a total of \$110 million to meet the government's 2017 budget deficit. The original idea was to borrow \$55 million and refinance the other \$55 million by consolidating the government's debt while securing a lower interest rate. Governor Kenneth Mapp wanted \$260 million from the restructuring, which he would then use for capital projects, including building new schools and repairing those that were still sound but had suffered structural damage.

Elena Christian Junior High School (E.C.J.H.S.), located in La Grande Princesse, was among those that the Mapp administration had promised to repair. In fact, well over a year ago, the Department of Education [repeatedly said](#) to concerned parents and the media that the closure of E.C.J.H.S. would last only one year — the 2015-16 school year — while the school undergo repairs of what it called “longstanding structural and environmental issues.”

Fast forward to August 19, 2016, and the state of E.C.J.H.S. is deplorable.

Using an area at the facility's northwestern fence that had been cut for passage by vandals, a Consortium reporter [entered the shuttered school](#) working on a tip by a concerned resident. Immediately upon entering, the unkept state of the school is apparent. Classrooms have been vandalized, items that were left behind either ransacked or stolen, glass windows broken; electrical wires slashed open -- the school had undergone a major electrical job just six year ago, according to Senator Kurt Vialet, who The Consortium spoke with this morning -- as vandals have stolen the copper found in the wire to sell. The lawn's growing wildly, compounding an aura of abandonment that has engulfed the school, which was to be shuttered for just one year.

Mr. Vialet, a former educator, said he had looked at a portion of a video published by The Consortium and was agitated by what he saw. The senator said he would reach out to Deputy Superintendent of D.O.E., Vaughn Hewitt, who is also over maintenance according to Mr. Vialet, to determine why E.C.J.H.S. has not been better protected.

"This has made the situation a lot more harder. We're going to end up spending a lot more money now to refurbish that school because of the lack of having someone there to guard the school," Mr. Vialet said. "That's something that I've brought to them before, that the schools were wide open and apparently some vandalism was taking place and they were supposed to make sure that the schools were secured."

Mr. Vialet said if the cost to repair E.C.J.H.S. was first \$5 million, with the damage done to electrical cords and the vandalism that has taken place, he guessed that the cost had risen by \$2 million. In contrast, the cost to hire three security guards to secure the building for a year, with each earning about \$30,000 annually, would be near \$100,000, a fraction of the \$2 million -- and that's just a guesstimate -- that it will now cost the government to repair the facility.

"Sometimes we create more problems for ourselves by not protecting the site after we abandon the site," Mr. Vialet said, stressing that the plan was never to abandon E.C.J.H.S., but rather to refurbish the school; one of the newer ones built on this island.

Mr. Vialet said he intends to do a walkthrough of the public learning facilities here before [school reopens on September 6](#), and would add Elena Christian Junior High to the list. The senator also said he would push to assure that the school was among those that actually gets repaired when bonds are floated.

Cherie Munchez, Mr. Mapp's communications director, said this morning she would return with an official response.

No progress

As the 2016-17 school year begins, construction at Elena Christian and Evelyn Williams -- another school supposedly temporarily shuttered -- had not started; and D.O.E. officials told this publication in February that they were not sure when and if repair work would commence because the schools are considered capital projects, and the department itself does not have such funding in its budget.

"Both Elena Christian Jr. High and Evelyn M. Williams Elementary schools are considered capital projects. The Department of Education currently does not have the requisite funding to address many of its longstanding capital projects needs. When the decision was made to close Elena Christian and Evelyn Williams at the end of the 2014-15 school year following an extensive analysis of the structures, it was with the intent to repair and reopen, as our original press release stated. Commissioner McCollum and Education officials continue to look at the best course of action for both structures going forward," reads the D.O.E. statement issued in February.

Yet even before D.O.E. officials announced that some schools would be consolidated to allow for repairs on the shuttered facilities, Mr. Mapp made no secret of his desire to permanently close some schools, contending that some needed to be merged. Mr. Violet, however, is not of the mind that Elena Christian should be permanently shuttered, telling this publication that it is not fair for students who live in Kennedy, Princess and neighboring areas to venture all the way mid-island at the Charles H. Emmanuel building to attend classes. Furthermore, he said, Charles H. Emmanuel does not have the tools to adequately teach junior high students.

"Charles H. wasn't configured as a junior high school. There's no band room. The facility just isn't configured for junior high," he said.

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