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# Public Works Says Funding Hinders Road Maintenance, Yet 2021 Budget Cuts Maintenance Allocations

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At Tuesday's budget hearing before the Committee on Finance, Commissioner Nelson Petty Jr. of the Department of Public Works (DPW) said that lack of funding for maintenance jobs and the inability to find qualified maintenance workers hinder road maintenance. Even so, the proposed fiscal year 2021 budget significantly reduced allocations for repairs and maintenance.

Under the category of 'Other Services and Charges' in the proposed budget, \$1.8 million was allocated to repairs and maintenance territory-wide. In addition, the department expects to receive \$1 million from the Anti-Litter and Beautification Fund to assist with roadside cleanup and maintenance.

“Road maintenance, specifically the patching of potholes, is one of DPW’s most challenging and costly tasks,” Assistant Commissioner Dennis Brow said in testimony related to operations.

Senator Allison DeGazon voiced her concerns and inquiries in this regard, “If you know that’s your most expensive cost, the goal should be to eliminate or alleviate that. Why are we not fixing the roads appropriately so that we don’t have to patch? Is it storm water runoff? What is causing us to have to go back and patch the roads?”

Mr. Petty explained the nature of asphalt pavement as flexible in nature, subject to failure, and not designed to last forever. He then shared the need for a clear maintenance program that would address minor issues before they become big problems.

“That’s where we want to get to, to be able to seal a small hole in a road before it becomes a pothole, and that extends the life of every road,” said Mr. Petty. He followed it up by stating, “We’re doing the best with what we have.”

Public Works budgeted for the rental of six backhoes with a mandatory maintenance requirement as the department had trouble maintaining their equipment in the past, according to Mr. Petty. Once again, the reduction in maintenance in the budget was brought to the fore. When Senator Janelle Sarauw asked for the reason of the reduction, Mr. Petty responded, “Because we can’t find qualified mechanics.”

As a result, Ms. Sarauw inquired of the commissioner as to whether the budget should be revised to include a position for maintenance. Mr. Petty said that at least three more mechanics are needed in the territory, one for each island. More machinery owned by DPW is also a necessity.

Senator Myron Jackson recognized that DPW continues to come before the senate stating that the department needs additional funding to complete its duties for road maintenance. Mr. Jackson said that fees were increased, and funding was previously given, yet the Senate body was still unsure as to what DPW achieved toward getting revenue to do their job.

Senator Wayne DeGraff, who shared that he sponsored a bill for advertising on VITRAN buses and bus stops, requested a projected amount that DPW can expect to bring in from ads to generate revenue. Based on Mr. Petty’s recollection, bus wrapping generated \$3,000 per month per bus; therefore, Public Works can expect similar amounts in generated revenue from ads placed on and inside buses, as well as at bus stops, benches, and on placards. A plan is already in existence and Mr. DeGraff showed his eager anticipation of its implementation through enthusiastic encouragement, “Let’s get it done,” he declared.

Additionally, the Division of Personnel and the Office of Veterans Affairs shared testimony for their proposed budget for fiscal year 2021.

At the Division of Personnel, all 41 positions were filled and there are no current vacancies; however, a commonality noted, across various agencies and departments who came before the senate, was funds being left in their personnel budget.

“It’s more than just an anomaly, just one agency,” said Ms. DeGazon. “Each department lost personnel money because people were not hired.” As a result, those funds got reappropriated to offset another shortfalls within the agency or department. It is still unknown to the Division of Personnel as to why some departments and agencies are not posting and filling their vacancies, although Assistant Director Florine Audain-Hassel said that various attempts were made by her division to assess why this is happening and job fairs were held to assist.

For fiscal year 2021, the Virgin Islands Office of Veterans Affairs requested general funds appropriations in the amount of \$908,998. According to Director Patrick Farrell, the VA cannot continue to perform necessary functions with a cut in budget and thanked the Bryan administration for supporting his office. Additionally, \$117,000 is estimated to be received from the V.I. Lottery and the Taxicab Commission collectively to cover every day operating expenses.

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