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Waste Haulers: \$7.6 Million for 2017 Debris Cleanup Still Owed; Payment Protection Needed During 2020 Hurricane Season

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A toppled tree and debris block the path to enter Frederiksted from the Melvin Evans Highway following Hurricane Maria in September 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

Senator Marvin Blyden, who chairs the Committee on Housing, Transportation, Infrastructure & Telecommunications did not let the long-standing issue of overdue payment for waste haulers since 2017 go undiscussed by the V.I. Waste Management Authority's testifiers during Wednesday's hearing. As a result, concern for their payment protection during this hurricane season was brought up by Senator Allison DeGazon.

“I’m happy to hear that the \$2.5 million was made available for the haulers in order to avoid a strike,” Mr. Blyden remarked as he prefaced the first line of questioning. The \$2.5 million was made available by the Bryan administration and divided among the waste collection companies along with an agreement to temporarily continue waste collection. The small payment, however, leaves the bulk of the government’s \$26 million debt due to haulers and landfill operators outstanding.

Mr. Blyden then inquired about a pending source of payment to haulers: the \$7.6 million obligated through FEMA since the 2017 Cat 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria.

Initially, Acting Interim Executive Director Ann Hanley responded, “We are in the process of submitting invoices for the obligated project worksheets so that the haulers would be paid. That is a continual process, and it is ongoing.”

But when Mr. Blyden asked for clarification on whether invoices were still being submitted, as he recalled Waste Management saying previously it was at the end of that process, Ms. Hanley revised her initial statement and said, “The invoices have been submitted.” She then stated, “We are just awaiting the receipt of funding to pay the haulers.”

Early on during the first line of questioning, Mr. Blyden followed up on this issue by asking the Chief Financial Officer Heather Andrea Dailey if Waste Management was in contact with the Office of Disaster Recovery and the Office of Management and Budget in regards to the FEMA payments for haulers.

“Our grant administrators are in constant contact with them on a weekly basis. They have scheduled meetings, and they have been vigilant, and I would say even aggressive in terms of getting all of their requested items that they’ve asked them for,” responded Ms. Dailey. The committee chair requested that all documents and written communications relative to the FEMA payments be forwarded to him.

Since the territory is now in hurricane season, Ms. DeGazon questioned whether Waste Management had a solid plan of policies and procedures in place to protect local haulers who dispose of debris after a tropical storm or hurricane, so that “others don’t come in, they get paid, but our local haulers are still trying to be made whole,” she said.

Ms. Hanley reported the following, “Ms. Dailey has met with the director and we have had conversations about emergency contracts that are executed during the storms.”

In addition, she stated, “As it stand right now, we are doing our emergency preparations and that too will include the issuance of our contracts to ensure that the language that is needed for the protection of the contractors are in the contracts that will be issued.” Ms. DeGazon requested that a copy of that information be made available to her office for review.