

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Juan Luis Hospital Moving Emergency Room To Cardiac Center As Sewage Problems Persist

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ST. CROIX -- Overwhelming sewage and drainage issues have been affecting operations at the Juan F. Luis Hospital for the past week, but the hospital has gone dark on providing information to the public.

On Monday, Senate members of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, chaired by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, held what was described by Senator Alicia Hansen as a secret meeting -- [complete with a Legislative agenda](#) -- in the hospital's 3rd Floor Conference Room, that the media was not invited to, to discuss issues ranging from funding for the hospital, as well as updates on the current situation.

Mrs. Hansen, who is not a member of the committee, told The Consortium late Monday that she attended the meeting but refused to sign a secrecy document that had circulated. She also said that she was not pleased that the meeting was held in the hospital and not at the Legislature, where the public would be updated as well.

"I don't believe this meeting should have taken place other than at the Legislature," Mrs. Hansen said.

Mrs. Hansen said the most notable takeaway from the meeting was the fact that the hospital's executive team has decided to move the emergency room -- because of the immense sewage situation at the current location -- to the Cardiac Center.

The sewage and drainage problem has grown more hazardous since it was announced by the hospital [on May 1](#). On Sunday night, JFL chartered Seaflight to carry three psychiatric patients to the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital, according to an emergency room nurse who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The psych section is part of JFL's emergency room and has been affected with sewage drainage issues as well. Mrs. Hansen's information matched that of the nurse, with the senator stating that JFL officials were preparing a room at the Cardiac Center for psychiatric patients.

The nurse said ER employees were to begin their move to the Cardiac Center soon, but the facility was not quite prepared yet. That information also corroborated with details provided by Mrs. Hansen, who said that some ER equipment were already moved to the Cardiac Center, but some had to be taken back to the original ER because the Cardiac Center was not fully prepared, and the tools were needed at the original site.

The nurse said representatives of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) visited JFL on Monday to advise hospital officials on the plan of care that details how to successfully move the ER unit. "It's going to be a long time before we go back to the ER; they have to dig up the entire floor," said the nurse. The nurse said JFL officials estimated that the ER would remain at the Cardiac Center for about 12-16 months.

Mrs. Hansen was concerned that the Cardiac Center, once retrofitted to serve ER needs, would lose its original purpose, part of which she said included recovery for heart patients. She also commended Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director, Mona Barnes, who Mrs. Hansen said has been working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide emergency support. Mrs. Hansen, however, said that the effort to receive aid from FEMA might be pointless, as JFL is moving the ER to the Cardiac Center and the situation might not be deemed as an emergency anymore.

"My opinion is once they have the Cardiac Center, FEMA is not going to look at it like the hospital has an emergency," Mrs. Hansen said. "So what I think they should have done is allow Ms. Barnes to proceed with the indication that they don't have an option because I think the Cardiac Center is equally important."

The nurse said once the ER moves to the Cardiac Center, only one visitor will be allowed in a patient's room; at the current location, multiple visitors are allowed. "Because the unit will be smaller, we're also cutting down on beds," the nurse said.

The drainage and sewage problems at JFL cannot be fixed by patchwork because the pipes are about 25 years old, Mrs. Hansen said, quoting JFL officials at the meeting on Monday. Governor Kenneth Mapp [has requested \\$3 million](#) for a complete reconstruction that would eliminate the problem. At a press conference at Government House on Monday, Mr. Mapp said he would amend his original proposal to the Legislature to add \$1.5 million for fixes at Roy Lester Schneider Hospital as well. To get the funds, certain gross receipts tax bonds and matching fund bonds would require reprogramming, along with funds from the Community Facilities Trust Account, according to Government House.

Senators present at the meeting along with Mrs. Hansen were committee members Dwayne DeGraff and Janette Millin Young; both senators are also part of the Minority Caucus, as well as Committee Vice Chair Kurt Violet, and committee member Sammuel Sanes.