The Virgin Islands Consortium

Waste Management Authority Hearing Reveals Rampant Waste of Gov't Funds

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Former Waste Management Authority Executive Director Adrian Taylor **By. VI LEGISLATURE**

Members of the Committee on Finance were prepared to receive testimony from the V.I. Waste Management Authority (W.M.A.) on their fiscal year 2021 budget last week, but a pointed line of questioning ensued relative to former executive director Adrian Taylor about his qualifications and inexplainable payouts for undocumented leave. Mr. Taylor was then hired back on a temporary contract at $85 per hour after his official resignation on May 6, 2020, according to testimony. All this while members of the authority sat before the Finance Committee in justification of increases to next year's budget — one that Senator Kurt Vialet, committee chair, said was merely a cut and paste of last year's budget with no evident execution since then.

Senator Oakland Benta said the U.S. Attorney's Office was investigating W.M.A.

Mr. Taylor may have held this position without the required qualifications and expertise. Interim executive director Ann Hanley, who was chief operations officer during his tenure as executive director, claimed to have no knowledge of his background.

According to Chief Financial Officer Heather Andrea Daley, "Mr. Taylor was hired by the board, so the board has his information. We don't particularly have his information."

Senator Alicia Barnes stated that she was unimpressed by his performance and dissatisfied with his service to the Virgin Islands. "Persons can show up from wherever with a certain accent and claim certain expertise and or experience, prove nothing, and be compensated time and time again in this territory, while we treat our own, no pun intended, like trash. It is a shame and it is an indictment on us as a people," Ms. Barnes said.

Upon his resignation, Mr. Taylor received a payout in the amount of about $12,000 for allegedly owed vacation leave. However, Human Resources Director Sherlikia Lewis was unable to find record of him utilizing leave. Testifiers were also unable to provide the date he last worked.

From the standpoint of Mr. Vialet, "Adrian Taylor needs to be terminated. He owes us," the powerful Finance Committee chair said.

The authority relayed that Mr. Taylor's current contract is paying him $85 per hour, not to exceed 20 hours per week for 3 months. The total salary for the contract is not to exceed $40,000 for that time, although he is still off-island — speculated to have left since last December. Interim Executive Director Ann Hanley claimed the contract is for the purpose of transitioning roles and "specific landfill activities" from Mr. Taylor to Ms. Hanley, although she was working directly with the former executive director before assuming her current role.

Testifiers shared that vehicles were purchased in the total amount of $250,000, pending shipment for almost 7 months for a slew of reasons. According to Senator Marvin Blyden, those used vehicles were purchased by Mr. Taylor through a family member and he warned Mr. Taylor against doing so in previous conversation. Initially, testifiers claimed to have no knowledge to the validity of Mr. Blyden's claims and only provided the name of the Florida-based company as Exquisite Auto Sales. When questioned further and more directly by Mr. Vialet, Ms. Daley revealed that an RFP was not put out for the purchase of those vehicles. Instead, Mr. Taylor initiated and approved their purchase, and he was the one who proposed the company.

Mr. Vialet requested a copy of the contract between Waste Management and Mr. Taylor so that the committee can make determinations as to whether the authority is unnecessarily spending funds that could be reapportioned to other departments and agencies of the government that have significant budget gaps.

Approximately $6 million was paid to contractor Oasis over the past 8 years, assisting with consent decree compliance and reporting for audits, said Ms. Daley, the W.M.A. chief financial officer. A new contract of $2 million over two years is in place with Oasis for the construction of a new landfill on St. Croix and the construction or expansion of the Bovoni landfill on St. Thomas. To date, there were no invoices and returns on that new contract. As it relates to the landfills, the authority is still out of compliance. According to testimony shared at the hearing, since the June 2019 fires damaged the Anguilla landfill's transfer station, there has been no functioning system to compact incoming waste of 150 tons per day for the past year, yet Ms. Daley shared that increased personnel costs included an allotment of $539,000 for new personnel to man the new waste transformation system that is not in place as yet. The Anguilla landfill on St. Croix remains a decade-old issue to the Federal Aviation Administration due to its proximity to the airport, not to mention the harmful emissions, frequent underground fires, and possible risk of implosion or collapse.

The 2021 budget requested a 15 percent increase of $1.5 million in personnel costs, yet W.M.A. continues to have over 70 vacancies across all three islands, according to the post audit report. In the last year, according to Ms. Lewis, 11 employees departed and 22 came onboard. Mr. Blyden concluded that most of the critical vacancies, like chief engineers and managers, directly affect the functionality and revenue generation of the authority. He urged them to creatively find ways to fill those positions to effectively deal with the bigger issues at hand.

Additionally, too many essential heavy equipment and vehicles on all three islands were deemed inoperable by the agency, even as W.M.A. has a vendor listing of $20 million for new items it is seeking to procure. Ms. Hanley said that a cost benefit analysis was being conducted with the fleet manager to determine if the inoperable vehicles were viable enough to repair, or if new ones should be purchased.

Mr. Vialet agreed that V.I.W.M.A. needs to be funded. However, before the budget could be approved, he requested a meeting with the board to determine the nature of how decisions were made as it relates to the hiring of the former executive director, the illegal purchase of vehicles using government funds, the current contract with Mr. Taylor, and other issues that the authority failed to address within the past year that incurred costs to the government.