The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Expected Outcome, Gustav James No Longer Commissioner Of Public Works

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ST. THOMAS -- A rumor that had been swirling around for several months manifested itself into reality on Tuesday afternoon: Gustav James is no longer the commissioner of the Department of Public Works.

Mr. James, who only recently returned from vacation, offered Governor Kenneth Mapp his resignation this afternoon, following conversations the men had yesterday and today, according to a Government House release announcing the resignation. Mr. Mapp accepted Mr. James's decision, according to the release, and thanked him for his service.

Mr. Mapp named Nelson Petty Jr., who had served as commissioner while Mr. James was on vacation, as acting commissioner of D.P.W. Mr. James will no longer serve on the boards of the Virgin Islands Port Authority and the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority. He was asked by the governor to remain on the Water and Power Authority's board as a private citizen, and he has agreed, according to Government House. Mr. James's nomination to serve on the board, as well as Mr. Petty's appointment to serve as commissioner of D.P.W., will be forwarded to the Senate for further vetting.

Long rumored to be imminent, Mr. James's resignation will not come as a surprise to those in political circles. Under his tenure, important roadwork remained in limbo, including over $90 million in GARVEE bonds projects. And while some road projects may have started, they were not significant enough to calm the growing discontent with Mr. Jame's performance.

Also on Mr. James's watch, the Paul E. Joseph Stadium remained stalled for over two years; the Main Street Revitalization Project had become so mired in confusion that Mr. Mapp recently announced that his administration had terminated Tip Top Construction's contract to complete the job, and senators had grown tired of calling on D.P.W. to start projects whose monies were sitting at the Public Finance Authority (P.F.A.) waiting to be used.

In August 2016, Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly assailed the administration for some $144 million in capital projects funds that sat unused.

“There are millions sitting in the P.F.A. account for capital improvement projects that have been authorized by this body on three islands, and not a stone has been moved,” Mrs. Rivera-O’Reilly lamented last year at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall, speaking directly to Nellon Bowry, director of Management and Budget, during a Committee on Finance meeting.

“Not a bulldozer has been placed on the ground. Not a job has been created. So I submit to you that the government is just as responsible for the stagnation that we’re seeing. Because if you can’t roll out those capital improvement projects that will generate jobs, then there will be no consumer spending. And if there’s no consumer spending then there’s no corporate taxes, or gross receipt taxes. You have a problem; Houston, you have a problem,” Mrs. Rivera-O’Reilly continued, as she blasted the administration for the slow pace in which it has moved.

"What good is it to the people of this territory that hundreds of millions of dollars sit in P.F.A. account and are not being deployed to fix the roads and create jobs and generate economic activity in the territory?” she asked.

Whether Mr. Petty's tenure as commissioner will be any different relative to moving projects forward, remains to be seen.