

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At JFL Townhall, Talk Of New Hospital, Transition To Mobile Units, And Reasons For Laying Off Employees

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ST. CROIX -- Officials of the Juan F. Luis Hospital, including the facility's [new CEO, Wanda M. Ruben](#), its acting board chairman, Troy deChabert-Schuster, along with Dept. of Health Commissioner Michelle Davis, spoke about a new direction for the beleaguered hospital, its compromised state following Hurricane Maria, and plans to transition to a mobile setup which is being called the "Western Shelter Systems".

The townhall comes as the Mapp administration makes its argument to the federal government for funding not to repair the hospital, but to construct a new, smaller facility altogether, which Mr. deChabert-Schuster said would accommodate no more than 150 patients.

The event, which was held at hospital's conference center room, was also part of the new CEO's effort to engage with the community, updating residents on the status of the facility and plans moving forward.

Throughout the townhall, which lasted over an hour, officials spoke with certainty that funding would be made available through the federal government for a new hospital. The Consortium pressed the officials for a sure answer, and while Mr. deChabert-Schuster referred the publication to Governor Kenneth Mapp for a clearer response on the matter, Ms. Davis said some funding would be available to build new facilities on all three clear.



Wanda Reuben, JFL's new CEO, responds to

a question posed during a townhall meeting held on Thursday at the hospital. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

The transition to the mobile units, which Mr. deChabert-Schuster -- echoing Mr. Mapp -- said could be stationed at the hospital for up to five years, follows an assessment and discussions between Mr. Mapp and hospital officials, where it was determined that JFL, just like the Schneider Regional Medical Center (SRMC), could no longer adequately care for patients. In light of this, critically ill patients were being airlifted to facilities outside of the USVI until the "Western Shelter Systems" opens sometime in December.

It was for this reason that Mr. deChabert-Schuster said the hospital had to layoff many of its employees. "Over the years these hospitals have been greatly overstaffed and the board has discussed many times the need to reduce the workforce," he said. "And at this juncture it becomes especially important because our census has dropped significantly; our revenues have decreased as a result, and as we move toward the Western Shelter, there will be a diminished capacity compared to what we had in the hospital prior to the hurricane, and also getting ready for a smaller building."

"We're projecting a hospital building of maybe 150 beds, versus the 250 that [the Juan F. Luis Hospital] was built for initially," he added.

Importantly, as the government makes its case for new hospitals in both districts, and especially on St. Croix where less damage was sustained after Maria compared to the destruction exacted on SRMC in St. Thomas by Hurricane Irma, officials must be able to prove to the federal government that a new facility will be needed. To that end, The Consortium sought an overview of the damage to the building by Mr. deCharbert-Schuster.

"Some of the other damage goes even before the hurricane. The building was suffering from deferred maintenance; we have always been cash-strapped and have not been able

to maintain the hospitals in the best possible condition," Mr. deChabert-Schuster said. He added that substandard materials such as cast iron pipes, which become rusted overtime, were used during the construction of the hospital, which in part has caused the sewage problem the current facility has struggled with. He also mentioned electrical and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) problems JFL has faced.

"And then the hurricane just came and put the icing all over that cake," Mr. deChabert-Schuster said. "With all the water that infiltrated the building, it just caused grave deterioration of all systems and widespread growth of mold, which affects the health of our patients and our staff, and it was just a really bad cascade of events that was just further exacerbated by the hurricane."