

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Fresh From Washington, Mapp Expresses Optimism, But \$7.5 Billion Request Not A Certainty

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Ernice Gilbert **November 28, 2017**



ST. CROIX -- After spending two weeks on the U.S. mainland, at least half of which was spent in the nation's capital, Governor Kenneth Mapp expressed optimism during a press briefing on Monday at Government House here, telling Virgin Islanders that the feedback from congresspeople he interacted with was positive.

For one, the governor quoted U.S. Office of Management Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, who said the territory's assessment of hurricane damage was the most thorough.

"I thought overall it was good," Mr. Mapp said, referring to the feedback in Washington. He said a number of U.S. lawmakers have agreed to amend language in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act), that would pave the way for the territory's \$7.5 billion request.

Currently under the Stafford Act, the federal share of the costs for disaster relief is no less than 75 percent of the eligible costs. Total assistance under the Act for one emergency is limited to \$5 million, except when the president determines additional funds are needed. If additional funds are needed, the president must report to Congress on the extent of the additional need. In the territory's case, the federal government has burdened 100 percent of the cost under the Stafford Act, and has spent well beyond the \$5 million limit per disaster as determined by President Donald Trump. But the Act was not created to help states and territories rebuild; instead, it's a setup that helps with providing immediate aid after disasters. To receive the \$7.5 billion that the territory is requesting, amendments must be made to the Act.

But even with amendments that authorizes such funding amounts, there are doubts that the territory would receive the \$7.5 billion that the Mapp administration has requested. On Monday, Mr. Mapp said the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) would be visiting the hospitals to determine whether the medical facilities would need to be torn down and rebuilt altogether, or whether repairs would be the best option. If the conclusion favors repairs, it would most likely decrease the \$7.5 billion ask.

The same goes for the schools. Mr. Mapp said while over 8 schools were condemned after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, his administration was looking at rebuilding only 6. The facilities will need to be examined by USACE as well, whose engineers will determine the best path forward.

The Mapp administration has not provided the media with a copy of the assessment, which would give the public a better understanding of the sum.

Below, find the other important pieces of news from the Monday briefing.