

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Clarify: \$4 Million Will Be Used For Rent, New Building And Remodeling

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ST. CROIX -- [The \\$4 million](#) that has been redirected through a bill by members of the 32nd Legislature for the purpose of moving the St. Croix Legislature to a new location because of mold issues, will not all be used to rent facilities, Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly told The Consortium late Monday.

The bill, approved during a Senate session on Friday, re-appropriates funds that were to be used to repair the Juan F. Luis Hospital's heating, ventilation and air conditioning system, called HVAC, and monies to repair the hospital's sewer issues. In total, \$4 million would be spent on the aforementioned work: \$1 million for the HVAC issues and \$3 million for the sewer problems. The funds were redirected from section 1 of Act No.

7972 and section 2 Act No. 7973.

But instead of using all the funds to pay rent, the Legislature is using the funds for three purposes: to pay rent at two facilities that the Legislature is currently renting on St. Croix on 6-month contracts, one for \$3,000 and the other for \$11,000, according to Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly. The remaining funds will be used to "hopefully" purchase a building in Golden Rock and to remodel it. The building costs roughly \$975,000, according to Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly, for which the Senate has made a downpayment of \$50,000.

The two buildings are being rented because the over 100 32nd Legislature employees could not fit in one building, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

Once the building is purchased, the remaining funds from the \$4-million re-appropriation will be used to remodel the facility. The bill also includes language that would authorize the redirecting of remaining funds once the remodeling is complete.

The senator said the move was necessary because the St. Croix Legislature was rendered uninhabitable following Hurricane Maria. Asked what were her thoughts on the argument that while other government employees were still occupying buildings infested with mold, senators appropriated their way out of the issue, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly highlighted the role of senators as critically important. "I would say that the legislative body, your Senate, is the body that makes laws and that passes the budget and it's the first branch of government," she said.

The new building, located in Golden Rock, will not only house the Senate, but also the judicial branch of government, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. She said the discussion of combining the legislative and judicial branches of government has been in the works for years.

While the majority of lawmakers favored the bill, Senator Alicia Hansen dissented, and pointed to space in the facility that the Dept. of Human Services utilizes in Frederiksted as an alternative to the current complex. The Government of the Virgin Islands is already paying tens of thousands of dollars monthly in rent for the D.H.S. building.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly was on the other side of the spectrum in 2016, when senators attempted to purchase the former Innovative building, which has [since been acquired](#) by business man and gubernatorial candidate Warren Molser for about \$4.7 million.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly lashed out at Senate Democrats in August 2016, and said if the building were to be purchased, it should be used as a government-owned mental health facility; not the Legislature. And she condemned a move by Senate Democrats in 2016 to tour the facility, deeming it "a total disregard of the preemption rules of the legislation."

"The people of the territory expect us to create jobs and to pass legislation that will positively impact and cure our societal ills. To consider spending millions of dollars to relocate the St. Croix Legislature is simply appalling and a slap in the face to our constituents," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly [said in 2016](#).

On Friday, however, her stance was starkly different: "We know we need to find a new building," she said, "both temporarily and permanently."

The measure was supported by all but three senators: Mrs. Hansen, Tregenza Roach and Janette Millin Young. Sen. Marvin Blyden was absent.

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