

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Roger Merritt No Longer Executive Director Of Waste Management

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Ernice Gilbert **March 02, 2018**



The Waste Management Authority (W.M.A.) has lost three of its top brass in the past two weeks, according to information provided by the authority, and details of the exodus received by The Consortium.

In a release issued late Thursday, W.M.A. announced the resignation of Roger Merritt, giving no explanation as to why he left, and announced that the authority's board of directors had appointed Tawana Albany-Nicholas as the interim executive director.

Last week, The Consortium learned that Vincent Ebesen, W.M.A.'s solid waste manager, was no longer at the authority as of two weeks ago, (it was not clear whether Mr.

Ebessen resigned, or was fired). His departure was followed by that of W.M.A.'s chief financial officer, Diandre Attwell.

Why W.M.A. has lost three of its top executives was not immediately clear. It had come under fire at recent Senate hearings for the slow pace in which local trash haulers were being compensated following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. During a Committee on Finance hearing [in the first week of February](#), lawmakers expressed frustration that the official from W.M.A. that could have provided pertinent information relative to the apparent stall in payments for the trash haulers, Mr. Merritt, was not present.

"It's disturbing to me," said a perturbed Senator Marvin Blyden. "Every time we have a hearing or trying to get a hearing, I have to postpone or cancel because the director is off island. That's a problem. That's a serious problem. I'm concerned about the haulers and their payment."

The ire of senators was across the board. Nonpayment for five months "would literally cause some small contractors to go bankrupt," said Senator Kurt Vialet. "Because they got to meet payroll, they got to meet everything else and they have not been paid yet. I want to caution that we have a window of time to be fully reimbursed, and that window of time is March 20. So all the parties need to meet in one room and be able to decipher whatever issue is stopping payment."

Public Finance Authority Executive Director, Valdamier Collens, said agencies such as W.M.A. most likely started gathering information about project worksheets in September or early October. However, at that time the government did not have consulting firm Whit O'Brien on board, part of whose job is to maximize federal dollars available to the territory. Mr. Collens said a mechanism should be in place that would allow the V.I. government to quickly retain and pay waste haulers following the passage of storms.

But Mr. Vialet protested, stating that haulers received a partial payment in December, an indication, he added, that the process of paying waste haulers had already been in place.

W.M.A. gave a list of haulers whose services the authority had retained. They included 6 in St. Thomas, 8 in St. Croix and 11 in St. John. When asked to provide a total sum of what has been paid to these contractors, W.M.A.'s director of procurement, Sandra David, could not say. Her response invited Senator Nelson's displeasure, who stated that such information were to be par-for-the-course during hearings.

The lawmakers appeared genuinely frustrated with the situation, many of whom have been bombarded for help. But the most impassioned response came from Senator Brian Smith, who lamented the situation of the waste hauling companies, most of them small operations.

"All the big fancy names, all the big contractors, these guys getting paid on time, on time!" said Mr. Smith, his voice peaking. "But our small guys — our small guys! — the guys them I represent, stopping me on the road all the time, running in front of my truck to cut me off, their eyes all bloodshot, and they're saying they ain't get paid in months! They haven't been paid in months! How is that fair? Anybody, is that fair?"

The room fell silent.

"It's a big travesty, it's an injustice when the small guy isn't paid for months," Mr. Smith added. "What is his wife to do? What is his banker to do?"

Ms. David said invoices were submitted two weeks ago for waste hauling services from September 2017 to January 2018, to Whit O'Brien to prepare project worksheets and submit them to FEMA for funding. A timeline on when the consulting firm would complete the worksheet was not provided, however.

It was not too long after the February 6 hearing that Mr. Ebessen's tenure at W.M.A. came to an end, seemingly beginning an exodus of the authority's top brass.