The Virgin Islands Consortium

FEMA, D.P.N.R., Provide Guides On How To Build Hurricane-Proof Homes

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ST. CROIX -- The Department of Planning and Natural Resources (D.P.N.R.) together with FEMA, held the first of many planned meetings to introduce the fourth edition of the Stronger Home Guide in the Virgin Islands. The meeting, which was open to builders, contractors, and other construction professionals, as well as homeowners and the general public, was held on Tuesday at the University of the Virgin Islands.

According to the FEMA representative, Jonathan Westcott—a civil engineer at FEMA's Building Science Branch—who spoke at the meeting, the purpose of the meeting was to explain some of the changes between the old and new building codes.

To clarify, neither the meeting nor the fourth edition of the Stronger Home Guide divulged information on the exact VI building codes, but rather, presented information that should act as a guide. Officially, the title of the guide is Construction Information for a Stronger Home, 4th Edition April 2018; with every effort to make it known in the document that "ALL CONSTRUCTION MUST COMPLY WITH THE U.S.V.I BUILDING CODE".

A prefaced history of the document states in part that it was developed by the USVI and FEMA to provide construction information for a stronger home in the territory, by referencing the VI Building Code. The second edition was published in 1995 following Hurricane Marilyn, and the third in February, 1996. The new guide was developed by referencing the updated 2018 International Building Code, the 2018 International Residential Code, and the American Society of Civil Engineers.

During his briefing, Mr. Westcott noted that the 1996 edition of the guide had proved useful, since they found that many individuals were still using the old copies up to 20 years later. However, he also acknowledged it was undeniable that there were issues with the old copies—citing that many of those he had seen were missing parts, or faded with time, making it difficult to properly read the descriptions or the diagrams.

While the Stronger Home Guide had not been updated in 20 years, Mr. Westcott stressed that the actual building codes adopted by the territory occurs every three years. Generally speaking, the territory implements the International Building Code six months after the effective date. The last update to International Building Code was 2015—thus, the three-year cycle would have placed the update to occur sometime in 2018.

But, according to Mr. Westcott, the hurricanes themselves were not a deciding factor to updating the codes; however, they did provide some newly available guidance; and with that, DPNR and FEMA decided they needed to update their guide.

"We recognized that because it [code update] happened during the hurricanes, we needed to get the information out better, so we wanted to have sessions like this to make people aware of what the changes are and give people an opportunity to ask questions," he said.

The meeting provided information for the fourth edition in five recovery advisories developed based on things learned by DPNR and FEMA from the storms. The advisories are:

- Recovery Advisory 1: Rebuilding Your Flood-Damaged Home
- Recovery Advisory 2: Attachment of Rooftop Equipment in High-Wind Regions
- Recovery Advisory 3: Installation of Residential Corrugated Metal Roof Systems
- Recovery Advisory 4: Design, Installation, and Retrofit of Doors, Windows, and Shutters
- Recovery Advisory 5: Rooftop Solar Panel Attachment: Design, Installation, and Maintenance.

When asked by The Consortium whether this was the first of this type of meeting, Mr. Westcott said it was the first 'public' one.

"We think of resilience as a whole chain. Building codes is one part of it; having strong materials is another part; making sure that stuff is constructed properly in the field is

another part; and then making sure that stuff is maintained over the years is another part," said Mr. Westcott. "We've had meetings with building suppliers to talk about stronger materials, we've done trainings for engineers, architects and other home builders, to kind of explain to them how best to construct things in the field."

Overall, the goal is to make stronger, safer buildings, capable of withstanding hurricane-force winds and flooding—building resiliency in the territory. Mr. Westcott praised D.P.N.R.'s relationship with FEMA in achieving just that. "It's just been really great to work with them, they are very dedicated and passionate about what they do and they are a great partner," he said.

A similar meeting will be held on St. Thomas sometime in May.

Individuals can contact the Flood/Wind Building Science Helpline for more information or any questions at FEMA-BuildingScienceHelp@dhs.gov, (866) 927-2104; or go to http://www.FEMA.gov/Rebubild/BuildingScience.

Feature Image: FEMA representative Jonathan Westcott, a civil engineer at FEMA's Building Science Branch, addresses community members during Tuesday's on building stronger homes. (Credit: Donna Bellot, VIC)