

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Veterans Drive Improvement Project Is 'Largest Single Road Project In The History Of USVI,' Officials Say

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ST. THOMAS -- The Veterans Drive Improvement Project officially broke ground on Tuesday, beginning construction on the single largest road construction project in the history of the U.S. Virgin Islands according the government officials. While specifics on the project's timeline were not discussed at the groundbreaking ceremony, the massive waterfront project begins this spring and will be completed in summer of 2021 according to the Federal Highway Administration -- spanning three miles in length and taking just over three-years to complete.

Governor Kenneth Mapp revealed at the roadside ceremony that once completed, the new waterfront structure would also double as a territorial monument to veterans who

have served honorably in the United States Armed Forces. The project is poised to bring a modern, nature-infused design to the waterfront, with cultural additions and architectural features not seen anywhere in the region.

The project includes the construction of two new lanes along the existing Veterans Drive, with the construction of land dividers with palm trees, including a major new pedestrian promenade supported by a new concrete sea wall. With the groundbreaking event taking place near the roadside across the street from the Lucinda Millin Home, officials noted that “features” designed to slow down trucks and other heavy equipment would also be included when the project is concluded in 2021, a move they hope will reduce noise pollution in the downtown area. Officials did not specify if these features would simply be signs, more prominent traffic signals or if the roadway would be equipped with more aggressive attributes when managing the speed of large trucks.

The expanded waterfront area on the south side of Charlotte Amalie's historic district is set to transform the harbor with the reconstruction and widening of Veterans Drive from west of Hospital Gade to the Long Bay Road.

“This is the single largest road project in the history of the U.S. Virgin Islands, coming in at about \$42 million for the first phase alone, said Department of Public Works Commissioner Nelson Petty. “The efforts that were done to complete this project and to get it to this point is a tremendous accomplishment for the VI and for this department.”

Preparations began earlier this month with the demolition of the historic pump house that has existed untouched well after the shoreline began development over 101 years ago.

Mr. Petty later told attendees that the project would help to alleviate existing traffic congestion, provide future roadway capacity, improve safety for motorists and pedestrians, and help better highlight important historical sites such as the Fort Christian Museum. The roadway will include pedestrian walkways on both the south and north sides of Veterans Drive, extending from Lover's Lane all the way to Fort Christian -- the oldest standing structure on the island of St. Thomas.

The project will start with the widening of the roadway, pavement reconstruction, seawall construction, utilities, drainage, signalization, lighting, promenade (also known as a paved public walk, typically one along a waterfront at a resort or city) and landscaping will be carried out by American Bridge Company -- an off island civil engineering firm that focuses on design, the management of structures, transportation systems, and infrastructure. American Bridge Company has built some of the world's most notable bridges including the Tappan Zee, Verrazano Narrows, Mackinac Straits, Bayonne, and structures in San Francisco-Oakland Bay East -- making it a reasonably suitable candidate for an infrastructure project of this size.

The project is a collaborative effort between several government and private entities, with the Virgin Islands Government alongside the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Federal Highway Administration Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division, the Virgin Islands Department of Public Works, the Virgin Islands Public Finance Authority and American Bridge Company, which was awarded the contract for the project.

As the Virgin Islands pushes toward a more modern future with rebuilding efforts underway, the new waterfront monument on St. Thomas officially kicks off revitalization projects that could potentially change how visitors and residents experience and interact with the territory's history and culture. The new waterfront addition will feature a number of miniature parks along the roadside, with additional walkway accommodations connecting visitors, joggers, boaters and residents with the Havensight Mall, Yacht Haven Grande, and the Austin "Babe" Monsanto Marine Terminal in Crown Bay. viNGN's public WiFi hotspots placed in public venues, shopping malls and local parks following hurricane recovery efforts brings the Virgin Islands in-line with what many parks and public spaces nationwide have been offering pedestrians and shoppers for quite some time -- free WiFi to search while shopping or exploring.

The site may also serve as a memorial for the longstanding pump house that will be replaced with one of several miniature waterfront parks.

During his remarks, Mr. Mapp said the "time is not on our side," referencing the expiration on federal funds if wheels don't begin turning on various projects and federally funded relief programs in the territory. "Every time one of these heavy trucks passes between the Legislature and the fort, they damage the fort," Mr. Mapp said. "The shaking of the ground and the impact to the foundation of the fort by the heavy equipment that flow through that roadway has a negative impact on Fort Christian."

The second phase of the project is expected to bring the waterfront walkway and roadway around the Legislature, making it the most important phase of the project according to the governor. The next phase seeks to divert traffic around the legislature to preserve the newly renovated fort.

The final project, or second phase will be approximately three miles long when it is completed. Mr. Mapp shared information formulated by the Chamber of Commerce, which estimated that approximately \$1 million floats away when large ships like the Oasis of the Seas skip Virgin Islands ports in favor of other competitors in the Caribbean. The governor told attendees that the seafloor dredging needed to bring bigger ships into St. Croix would pay for itself within the first year.

Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, a member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and the House Committee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management has been placed on key house committees to support long-term recovery efforts in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has jurisdiction over all modes of transportation including aviation, maritime and waterborne transportation, highways, bridges, mass transit, and railroads. The congresswoman's apparent focus pushes for improvements to critical infrastructure in the U.S. Virgin Islands and the insular areas, as well as the development of economically depressed rural and urban areas. This should help the local government in its bid to continue to win federal dollars for infrastructure developments to be constructed to federal standards.

Federal grants have allowed the the territory to continue recovery efforts and press forward with a number of capital projects like the Maine Street Revitalization Project, the Frederiksted Economic Revitalization Project, the reconstruction of major roadways throughout the territory, including the Bridge to Nowhere, and the combined \$90 million

airport expansion projects approved for both St. Thomas and St. Croix. Separately, the governor [recently announced a pending](#) \$230 million modernization plan for the Cyril E. King Airport. Months of project announcements show that the Virgin Islands is experiencing a major infrastructure overhaul comparable to rebuilding efforts after hurricanes Hugo and Marilyn and the economic explosion that saw the territory's population jump from 33,000 to 104,000 between 1960 and 1984.

That is, of course, if these projects get passed the "ground breaking" phase into full construction; there are examples like the Paul E. Joseph Stadium, which Mr. Mapp halted immediately upon taking office and held a [ground breaking event for in July of 2017](#) -- yet major work has yet to commence.

Even so, there are signs that work in the territory on major projects long promised by this and prior administrations, is well underway.

The Department of Public Works and the Mapp administration are asking pedestrians and motorists to exercise cautions when passing through constructions zones. Motorists might also find it useful to start seeking out new routes to help with congestion in the downtown area.