

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Meeting With FEMA Leadership, Mapp Calls For Immediate Sheltering In Case Of Storms, Release Of Federal Funding For Home Repairs Project

VIC News / **Published On June 20, 2018 08:21 AM /**

Staff **June 20, 2018**



Governor Kenneth Mapp met with Federal Emergency Management Agency leadership on Tuesday to discuss advancing the rebuild and repair of Virgin Islands schools, hospitals and public housing and to share his concerns about protecting residents in the event of a major storm this season, according to Government House.

Mr. Mapp is said to have explained to FEMA Administrator William Long and his team that the Virgin Islands had traditionally relied on its schools to serve as shelters, however, most of the territory's campuses were too damaged to be utilized this hurricane season.

He said that more Virgin Islanders would require shelter this year given that many homes are only protected by tarps or temporary repairs while the territory awaits funding for resilient and permanent housing reconstruction. In a letter to the FEMA head, the governor reiterated the concerns he expressed at Tuesday's meeting.

"I am imploring you to act now and help us to pre-position immediate sheltering options for the people of the Virgin Islands as we brace for what is expected to be another busy hurricane season," the governor wrote. "We are asking you to consider all possibilities, including preparing to provide aircraft and cruise ships in advance of a storm to evacuate as many people as feasible to safety until the storm passes."

Mr. Mapp said it was important for federal officials to understand that Virgin Islanders do not have the option to simply drive away from an impending storm and that, under current conditions, residents simply cannot be expected to ride out hurricanes as they have in the past.

"Virgin Islanders are rightfully anxious and concerned about our ability to ensure their protection from any potential storms this season," he said.

Speeding up the release of federal funds for repairs to homes and schools remains imperative and much of the governor's discussions with FEMA focused on finances and accelerating payments to contractors, especially those employing Virgin Islanders, Government House said.

In [a letter](#) issued to The Consortium responding to portions of a Washington Post article, William Vogel, FEMA's coordinating officer for Region II, revealed that of the \$186 million set aside for the Emergency Home Repair VI Program, the government as of Tuesday had only received \$13.5 million. The matter has caused issues with contractors who have performed work but had yet to be paid. For FEMA's part, the program calls for the local government paying 100 percent of the costs upfront, then following the performance of work, FEMA reimburses the full amount.

But the Government of the Virgin Islands does not have the wherewithal to handle such massive projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars. It usually has about four days of cash on hand; it has been shut out of the bond market so borrowing is not an option; and the 2017 storms did great damage to the local economy.

Last week, Government House said Mr. Mapp was successful in making arrangements with Mr. Vogel to allow the use of other funds previously approved for housing construction repairs until the new funding becomes available. The governor said he had introduced a "creative" solution to FEMA to remedy the problem, although he did not explain the solution. And while Mr. Mapp said his negotiations with the federal agency had been fruitful, FEMA procedures, he said, had stymied the quick release of the funds.

"We know that hundreds of millions of dollars have already been allocated to the Virgin Islands and will eventually come after all of the federal review processes, but we need the funding now," the territory's leader said Tuesday. "It is like we are sitting on a lake of freshwater and can't get anything to drink."

During the meeting, FEMA committed to providing additional staff to review the project worksheets and other paperwork required to release funds, according to Government

House. Mr. Mapp will also meet with congressional leaders and Trump administration officials in the coming weeks to discuss waivers and changes to federal laws that would facilitate funding for permanent repairs to private homes in the Virgin Islands.

Mr. Long said he would continue to strongly support local recovery efforts and wanted to assist in fulfilling the governor's vision for rebuilding a stronger Virgin Islands, according to Government House.

"I appreciate the opportunity to meet with the Governor today and discuss this progress and the need to focus not just on recovery, but preparedness for the 2018 Hurricane Season as well," Mr. Long said. "We will continue to partner with and support the territory and Governor Mapp throughout the recovery from and preparations for any disaster. The Governor is a strong partner and is leading an outcome-driven recovery focused on resilience for the Territory."