

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Dept. Of Justice Spends Over \$1 Million Annually On Rented Spaces; Contract With G.E.R.S. Expired 20 Years Ago

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ST. THOMAS -- Even as the Government of the Virgin Islands is staying afloat on days cash-on-hand at a time, some departments and agencies continue to spend millions of dollars on rent, funds that must be furnished by the G.V.I.

The latest to be revealed is the Virgin Islands Department of Justice. At the department's budget hearing on Tuesday, officials said D.O.J. spends \$1,134,000 annually on rental properties, with the local government paying the bulk of that amount -- roughly \$900,000 -- while the federal government helps with two of the units, for a total of just over

\$200,000.

D.O.J.'s rental space at the G.E.R.S. building in St. Thomas is in arrears by two months, while the department is behind on rent at its Castle Coakley space on St. Croix by three months. Of note, D.O.J.'s contract with G.E.R.S. for rental space in the pension system's St. Thomas complex expired in 1998, and D.O.J. officials struggled to give a reason as to why it had yet to be renewed.

D.O.J. will abandon its Castle Coakley space and move into a 2-story building in Estate La Reine -- the new complex after the Kingshill Post Office heading north. Chief Deputy Attorney General Joseph Ponteene said D.O.J.'s contract with the current landlord will end in two months. He did not reveal the cost of the new facility, although he said the cost was a little less than the current contract, and that the new space would be a bit smaller as well. "We plan on moving the first week in August," Mr. Ponteene said.

D.O.J. is seeking \$22.5 million for its Fiscal Year 2019 budget, but senators were not satisfy with the breakdown of the additional requests, with Senator Kurt Violet, Finance Committee chair, chiding testifiers for the lack of detailed information. "We can't -- and I'm just sending it out publicly now -- stop sending inflated numbers and you don't have justification. You can't send these inflated numbers and you don't break it down as to exactly what it entails," Mr. Violet said, referring to \$170,000 in D.O.J.'s budget that came attached with no breakdown. The senator pointed to multiple other expenses that came with no detailed expenditures.

Also inviting senators' ire was the absence of Attorney General Claude Walker, who Mr. Ponteene said was summoned to a mandatory cabinet meeting with the governor. Senator Neville James was having none of it.

"Mr. chair you know I have a problem with this setup here today. Because if agencies are going to do to us what Department of Justice is doing to us today, then basically we've gone up the river," Mr. James said.

He later added, "That can't work. If it comes to that then have us cancel the meeting. That can't work; I'm serious. It can't work. Suppose the governor wants to meet with an agency head everyday? So we're dead down here, then?"

On the issue of rental spaces and the exorbitant amount of dollars the government is spending on them, Governor Mapp [in 2016 announced](#) as part of his plan for infrastructure development, a complex on St. Croix that would house a number of departments and agencies, including the Department of Labor, the courts, Legislature, Human Services and others.

But while the territory's leader was in favor of some consolidation, he said bringing all government operations under one roof would stifle commerce in parts of the island that need the activity the most.

"When you do that, you're going to do what is called trenching. You're going to move all government employees [in] one place, and wherever you have some government services in the different towns and areas of the island, you're going to economically wipe them out," he said. "The key is how do we move government services into government facilities.

“But to build one building and move all government agencies will have a detrimental effect, particularly on the Island of St. Croix where, if you put it in the middle of the island, then you will finish wiping out the remnants of Christiansted and the activity that you have going on in Frederiksted, and then you would bring everything to a central core.”

Also giving testimony at Tuesday's budget hearing was the Public Services Commission, which sought a Fiscal Year 2019 budget of \$1,779,975.45, and the Bureau of Internal Revenue, which sought a 2019 budget appropriation of \$12,578,546.

Feature Image: Government Employees' Retirement System complex in St. Thomas (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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