The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Plans Modernization Of Senior Citizen Facilities Territory-Wide; First $32 Million For Road Construction Part Of $243 Million Release

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Ernice Gilbert July 13, 2018

Governor Kenneth Mapp wants to modernize the senior citizen facilities in the territory, outfitting the complexes with all the amenities that such 21st century homes boast.

That's according to the governor himself, who revealed his intentions during a Wednesday press conference at Government House on St. Croix, where he thanked cabinet members for their role in securing the $243 million Housing and Urban Development funding, which had been set aside for the territory but saw official approval for release on Tuesday. Mr. Mapp gave no timeline, however.

On St. Thomas, the plan is to shutter the Queen Louise Home for the Aged, purchase the Sea View Nursing Home and modernize it. On St. Croix, Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged would be completely redone as well. Both facilities would include long-term living, assisted living and independent living units, Mr. Mapp said, the latter housing seniors who can take care of themselves.

That governor, calling the plans his "pet project," said the new facilities would also be able to withstand a strong hurricane and operate independently with food, water and utilities for six weeks following a storm. Mr. Mapp also said that he’s forwarded legislation to the Senate for the purchase of Sea View.

The combined cost of the two facilities would be between $60-$70 million, the governor revealed. Funds for the work would be provided through the Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Community Development Block Grant—Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) Program, of which $1.6 billion has already been set aside for the USVI.

HUD on Tuesday approved the $243 million for release, which the government of the Virgin Islands will start expending on a variety of projects. Mr. Mapp told The Consortium on Wednesday that another $847 million would soon become available, and the government, like it did before the $243 million was released, has to once more prove that the projects it intends to undertake will benefit the low to moderate income portions of the community -- something Mr. Mapp said is not that difficult to accomplish since most of the territory is either low to moderate income.

"Given the demographics of the U.S. Virgin Islands, that's not a hard barrier to meet," Mr. Mapp said. "And so that gives us even more discretion as we do projects."

To be clear, when HUD approves funding for the local government, the funds are kept by the U.S. Treasury; the monies are not immediately given to the G.V.I. The government has to first prove the use of the funds by meeting the criteria set by the federal government. For HUD, one of the most important criteria is the government's ability to use the funds for unmet needs. "In this case you really need to look at your unmet housing needs, and then how you are going to ensure when you put your plan together, that in each instance of expenditure, that you can authenticate that of all the people that benefit, at least 70 percent of them are low to moderate income persons," Mr. Mapp said. This includes the paving of roads, for example, which the governor said received $32 million in the $243 million HUD release.

To emphasize the opportunity for massive federal funding for roads, the governor, giving an example, said, "If we had very large wealthy segments of the community and we were doing road projects with this money, we would get some pushback if those projects went in those communities because the quantum share of the folks there, even when you add the folks who may be working there, would not come to 70 percent of low to moderate income persons. Now you would look at the entire Virgin Islands and tell me what public road we could fix where 70 percent or more of the people traversing on that road, living in that neighborhood, do not meet low to moderate income."

The governor said the territory expects to spend more than $200 million from the HUD CDBG-DR funds on the territory's roads. To give an idea of how much work could be done with that amount, the governor said it costs between $1.2-$1.5 million to build one mile of two-lane road at Federal Highway Administration standards.