

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Emile Griffith Park design phase is 30% complete while other ballfields still wait for approval from the Department of Public Works

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Calvert White, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation (DSPR), testified before the Committee on Youth, Sports, Parks and Recreation on Monday to update the community on the departments FEMA projects, the progress of Paul E. Joseph Stadium, and the Government of the Virgin Island's (GVI) long-term plan for all recreational centers in the USVI.

Commissioner White told lawmakers that since his last update to the Committee, DSPR has completed six minor projects in its portfolio, which include Omar Brown basketball

court, Romeo Malone Community Center, Fair Child Park, Emancipation Garden, Franklin Roosevelt Park, and the Smith Bay Tiny Tot Park. He stated that while those projects were significantly smaller in size and funding compared to some of the departments' more extensive projects, those facilities considerably impact the community and the people who use them.

Commissioner White further explained that there are some more projects that will soon be "coming down the pipeline," such as St. Croix's Cramer's Park Pavilions (bungalows) and the Fort Frederik Restroom, both with 90% of the design stage complete—adding that both Cramer's Park Concession and the popular Vincent Mason Pool's design phase are 30% complete.

Furthermore, on the island of St. Thomas, the Emile Griffith Park design phase is 30% complete, while the Lionel Roberts Stadium, Alvin McBean Park, Smith Bay ballfield, and Ezra Fredrick ballfield are all still awaiting approval from the Department of Public Works (DPW) on the scope of work. According to Commissioner White, once these fields are approved, DSPR will request an Invitation for Bid (IFB) from the Department of Property and Procurement (DPP) for potential contractors. Additional Commissioner White stated that a request for proposal (RFP) for the architectural and design work for the St. John's Community Center is currently on its way to DPW for approval.

James Grum, Engineering Administrator for Capital Improvement Projects in the Department of Public Works (DPW) told senators that the long-term plan for most Recreational Centers in the territory is to upgrade them to be suitable as public shelters. Mr. Grum stated that concessions, shelters, and facility repairs are being designed by consultants in accordance with the 2018 International Building Code (IBC) per 29 VIC paragraph 292 to withstand Category 5 hurricane-force winds and earthquakes.

Mr. Grum further explained that presently there are twelve (12) facilities in design for St. Thomas, ten (10) facilities on St. Croix, and two (2) facilities on St. John. He said that projects, such as Kirwin Terrace Ballpark, are ready for procurement. However, contract timing depends on contractors' bid pricing compared to the FEMA estimates. However, according to Mr. Grum's testimony, if a contractor's pricing is higher than FEMA's pricing, they will have to spend time to ask FEMA to increase their estimates for reimbursement in order to write a purchase order obligating enough money before a contract can be signed.

As stated by Commissioner White in his testimony, "the goal of DSPR is to have all its facilities open for their intended use; sporting, recreation, and leisure activities. The completion of our FEMA projects will allow us to accomplish just that." To date, DSPR is currently still under strict guidelines issued by the Department of Health (DOH) with sanctions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Dr. Nicole Craigwell-Syms, Assistant Commissioner of DOH, told senators, "we at the Department recognize that physical activity is a great way to relieve the stress and fatigue caused by the limits set during the pandemic...the Department of Health's goal during this Pandemic is to address the holistic person; from chronic disease management to improved behavioral and mental health in adults and children." Dr. Craigwell-Syms further stated that athletes are at risk of suffering many behavioral and mental health symptoms and disorders, sometimes more than those of the general populous. "COVID-

19 managed to unfold new strains on athletes, potentially increasing vulnerability to behavioral and mental health symptoms," said Dr. Craigwell-Syms.

In preparation for DSPR to resume their operations, the department has been proactive in creating policies to govern how they will handle sports and activities at their facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The policies that were presented to the Committee speak to all sports and identifies the level of risk involved with each specific sport. As reported by Commissioner White, the various sports will be rated on three levels of risk; high, moderate, and low. Each group will have specific rules that must be adhered to in order to ensure all participants are safe while participating.

However, Dr. Craigwell-Syms, expressed that although a particular sport may be allowed due to its risk classification, tournaments or large events must be approved by the Department of Health in conjunction with any other relevant agency. She added that even though a sport may be classified as low risk, DOH also considers the presence of spectators' at the games. As the increased number of spectators inadvertently increases the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

In addition to DSPR Covid-19 operational guidelines, the department will also conduct a simulated opening so that its employees will be better prepared to provide services to the residents in the community. These simulated openings will also help ensure the safety of the community members and our employees. Commissioner White stated, "the simulations will create real-life scenarios, potentially a practice or baseball game, where we can evaluate our DSPR employees on how well they safely carried out the event."

Employees who attend those simulations will be observed on how they keep individuals socially distanced, sanitizing equipment, adequate signage at the park, sanitizing stations and handwashing stations, and monitoring proper mask-wearing by individuals utilizing the facilities. Commissioner White said that the tentative date for those simulation exercises in both districts is set for the first week of December.

Although the effects of the ongoing pandemic may have slowed down the functions of DSPR, Commissioner White assured the public that the department has several initiatives currently operating, such as the installation of AccessMats and buoyant wheelchairs on several beaches throughout the territory. Commissioner White stated that DSPR performed a dry-run of rolling out the AccessMats on Coki Point Beach, Magens Bay Beach, and Cramer's Park. "Several senators, an engineer from the DPW, personnel from the DPNR, and the Director of AARP, witnessed firsthand how the new equipment will assist our disabled community members or anyone who may have difficulty traversing across the sand to gain access to the water," said Commissioner White.

While DSPR has many initiatives that are currently operating, Commissioner White said the primary question he has faced within the last seven months has been, "When will we see sports in the territory again?" However, Commissioner White said, "there is no sure answer to that question with guidelines changing daily."