

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Officials Still Not Certain on Future of Medical Facilities in St. Thomas-St. John District

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Schneider Regional Medical Center in St. Thomas.

Three and half years after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, there are still major decisions to be made on hospitals and the cancer treatment center in the St. Thomas- St. John District.

Did enough damage occur at the Schneider Regional Medical Center (SRMC) for a new hospital to be built with federal funds? Will the Myrah Keating Community Health Center on St. John move to a new location? SRMC Interim CEO Dr. Luis Amaro and Darryl Smalls, project lead for the territory's hospital redevelopment team, addressed all these

questions in the latter part of the Disaster Recovery & Infrastructure Committee hearing Thursday afternoon.

One of the main concerns of the committee was that it seemed like there was a change of mind from the SRMC leadership to pursue the rebuilding option as opposed to just repairing the facility. In reality, the cost of the damage has not been determined by FEMA and the Virgin Islands.

"Right after the storms in conjunction with our leadership and medical staff, we had to go with the consultation from our engineer from the Army Corps of Engineers who was first on site as well as others that evaluated the center. Nothing could be viewed or identified at that time that indicated the hospital building needed to be brought to the ground and rebuilt," said Dr. Amaro. Senator Samuel Carrion then asked whether hospital and redevelopment team officials had identified what needed to be done. Dr. Amaro stated, "There are still on-going evaluations. That's what FEMA's doing."

FEMA and the Virgin Islands still haven't agreed to the amount of damages, according to Office of Disaster Recovery (O.D.R.) Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien. "Whether or not we would like to go for replacement, we have to agree on the damages," she said. A meeting planned for next week is expected to include a line-by-line assessment from FEMA, according to the O.D.R. director.

Another reason there could be more damage costs than initially assessed was that pre-existing damages not caused by the storms were not covered by federal dollars at the time, but now those problems can be included in the total cost of repair, according to testifiers.

There was no definitive answer on whether the Myrah Keating Community Health Center in St. John would change locations. Mr. Smalls said the facility's current location is central to the island but there could be factors later on that determine if it has to be moved.

When asked if a wing could be added to offer more services at Myrah Keating, Dr. Amaro responded, "There is certainly enough space within to be able to entertain more than what was being done there before." He added, however, that it comes down to "whether or not that can be afforded."

Senator Kurt Violet stressed the importance of reopening the Charlotte Kimelman Cancer Institute. "We must open it up because there is no other radiation services in the Virgin Islands; that is a loss we must eat. If it takes this body to allocate more money to the Kimelman Center, then we have to do it.

"Our folks that are on Medicare and Medicaid, a lot of them can't fly to the states for two-three months to be under radiation. A lot of them are staying here and dying. The radiation center is one of the first projects we must push to reopen and we made that plea to FEMA this week. You must assist in getting that center open."