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Construction of Federally Funded Projects in USVI Taking Longer Than Expected as FEMA Hardens Documentation Review Process

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Arthur A. Richards Jr. High School Demolition By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The V.I. Office of Disaster Recovery and the V.I. Dept. of Education told lawmakers Wednesday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency's pace of providing post-disaster funds to the territory has slowed the process of rebuilding, especially the territory's schools.

O.D.R. Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien spoke of the Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) of 2018, which she said has created some hurdles for the territory. She said FEMA is interpreting the law in a manner that ascertains pre-disaster damage to facilities is not assessed as part of the territory's

2017 hurricane recovery allocation of funds for resilient rebuild.

Senator Janelle Sarauw asked whether Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett could be sought for guidance on the matter. "Delegate Plaskett is all over this. She has actually introduced some legislation that would correct some of the infrastructure that has not been included in the original BBA language, and also to address some of the concerns that we are having because of the interpretation of the BBA," she said. Ms. Sarauw said she was thankful for the BBA but acknowledged it slowed the process of reconstruction.

The senator asked whether buildings were deteriorating rapidly with zero dollars obligated for permanent work. Mrs. Williams-Octalien responded, "For schools, correct." Asked whether FEMA provides timelines for their review process, the O.D.R. director stated, "As of late, especially now that we have this whole fixed cost plan that we're having more timelines associated with deliverables."

In a follow-up question, Ms. Sarauw asked whether FEMA was still in the practice of constantly revisiting submitted documentation for more clarity, Ms. Williams-Octalien said while FEMA reserves the right to review as much as it sees fit, "it is something we are seeing more than we would like to see happen."

Ms. Sarauw said, "We need to put some pressure as a local government on our federal counterparts in really moving the ball because it is unfair to the territory, to students, to parents, to teachers, overall that FEMA continues to act and move at a horse and buggy pace when this is critical infrastructure needed for this territory."

She added, "Education is a critical component of any society and FEMA has continued in my opinion to do a disservice to the people of the Virgin Islands."

V.I. Dept. of Education Chief Operations Officer, Dionne Wells-Hedrington, explained the hassle having to revalidate previously approved projects after FEMA questions documentation. "That's the cumbersome piece, having to go back and justify things that we have already agreed to previously. So that's where it becomes time consuming. We're committed to it, so we are going to push through."

Senator Novelle Francis inquired about the efforts of D.O.E. consultants on the matter. "We are talking four years later and we understand that there is time to go but we have to start making some progress," he said, later adding, "We cannot continue to be strong-armed by the FEMA process."

Asked by Senator Milton Potter whether the territory's experience with FEMA was commonplace elsewhere in the country, Mrs. Williams-Octalien said the situation is similar to FEMA relationships across the U.S., pointing to projects still ongoing tied to Hurricanes Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012.