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Following Scathing Comments From Vialet, FEMA Says \$675.2 Million For 78 Projects Have Been Obligated; Bryan Says Funds Being Expended

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Senator Kurt Vialet last week scolded the Bryan administration for what he deemed Lack of progress on the territory's recovery. A video of the comments went viral, and both FEMA and Governor Bryan have responded. By. ERNICE GILBERT, VI CONSORTIUM

The Federal Emergency Management Agency on Monday morning issued a lengthy release detailing projects where it said funds have been obligated for hurricane recovery across the territory.

The release preceded comments by Governor Albert Bryan, who listed during his Monday press briefing a number of projects he said were underway, while working to convey that Covid funding

provided to the territory by the federal government was being spent, and that the territory had multiple years to use the funds.

Both FEMA's release and Mr. Bryan's comments Monday follow a scathing assessment from Senator Kurt VIALET last week, who said [in a 6-minute video](#) that nothing was happening. The video went viral locally and has been viewed roughly 24,000 times.

"The community needs to see something," Mr. VIALET said during a Committee of the Whole hearing last week. "A hundred [plus] people from FEMA working in the Virgin Islands and we can't get nothing done." He emphasized: "Over a hundred federal individuals working here yet no project happening."

On Monday, FEMA sought to bring to light the amount of work the agency said it has done following the 2017 hurricanes, including the obligation of funds for 78 projects territory-wide.

"Our goal in supporting the recovery from hurricanes Irma and Maria is to implement innovative solutions toward overcoming the challenges left behind by the destructive 2017 storms to meet the territory's priorities of strengthening community lifelines for Virgin Islanders. FEMA will continue to work with our territorial partners to navigate a path toward an equitable recovery for all Virgin Islanders," said FEMA Recovery Director for the USVI Kristen Hodge.

Adrienne L. Williams-Octalien, Office of Disaster Recovery director stated, "The recent obligations for our housing communities, roads and electrical systems are timely and critical to improving the everyday life of Virgin Islanders. Our office remains focused on working with our local and federal partners to guarantee the continued obligation of permanent recovery work."

According to FEMA, this past spring, \$99.6 million has been obligated toward repairs for housing communities. Projects include:

- Obligations of \$16.6 million for repairs to the Estate Bovoni Housing Community and Community Center and \$3.5 million for the Estate Tutu Apartments on St. Thomas, and \$7.7 million for the Walter I M Hodge Pavilion and \$3.4 million for the Aureo Diaz Housing Community on St. Croix.

The projects to repair the housing communities include Hazard Mitigation Proposals to make windows, doors, and roofs more resistant against the ravages of storms, FEMA said. Proposals include:

- \$1.9 million for Estate Bovoni Housing Community to include replacement of damaged ceilings with water and mold-resistant board panels and installation of water-resistant weatherstripping around windows and doors.
- \$541,061 for Walter I M Hodge Pavilion to upgrade damaged gutters, vinyl flooring, door hardware and epoxy-based sealer concrete treatment along with door and window weatherstripping, and exterior security lighting.

Coordination between FEMA's utilities group and the territory to strengthen the power grid across the U.S. Virgin Islands generated an April obligation of \$172.5 million for electrical distribution permanent repairs on St. Thomas, according to the federal agency. FEMA said this includes a \$170.8 million Hazard Mitigation Proposal for the V.I. Water and Power Authority's (WAPA) blueprint to build a more reliable and resilient grid.

The \$172.5 million is in addition to \$143 million previously obligated to make St. Thomas' power distribution more resilient for a total obligation of \$315.5 million for the project.

Mitigation measures include:

- Installation of underground primary feeders and composite poles to provide grid hardening and more reliable electrical services to the customers.
- The work would stabilize electrical services from the western end of St. Thomas to different communities in the St. Thomas/St. John District.
- The electrical distribution repairs would ensure a more rapid stabilization for the power grid after disasters.

According to FEMA, work continues between FEMA's Transportation Group and the V.I. Department of Public Works on projects for permanent repairs to the territory's roads and DPW's facilities. This coordination has led to \$57.1 million obligated this past spring for DPW projects.

FEMA said it has obligated \$9.1 million for repairs to DPW's Anna's Hope Compound on St. Croix. The project includes \$279,953 for a Hazard Mitigation Proposal. Work to strengthen the sustainability of Anna's Hope Compound from disasters includes:

- Installation of stronger windows, doors, and roofing panels to make them more resistant to winds and rains of storms.

Road and watershed projects include:

- An obligation of \$2 million to repair roads provide access to neighborhoods in the Sandy Point area on St. Croix. This project includes a Hazard Mitigation Proposal of \$901,343.
 - Mitigation measures would strengthen the pavement of the roads with permeable fabrics and improve roadside drainage with roadway excavation and paved waterways.
- An obligation of \$2.8 million to repair roads damaged from flooding during Hurricane Maria in Estate Mount Pleasant on St. Croix. This project includes a Hazard Mitigation Proposal of \$1.2 million.
 - Mitigation measures would strengthen pavement most prone to saturated subgrades or erosion. This would allow pavement to better resist damage from heavy trucks or resist erosion.
- An obligation of \$5.1 million to repair roads and a commuter dock and ramp on Water Island. The watershed project includes a Hazard Mitigation proposal of \$2.4million.
 - Mitigation measures would strengthen pavement most prone to saturated subgrades or erosion, improve stormwater drainage to reduce the damage of saturated subgrades and erosion, and add curbs and gutters or paved roadways.
- An obligation of \$10 million for the Jersey Bay and Smith Bay watersheds on St. Thomas. The combined project includes a Hazard Mitigation Proposal of \$4 million. Mitigation strategies proposed for roads in the watersheds are:
 - Strengthening the pavement structure that would be most prone to saturated subgrades or erosion and managing stormwater by improving drainage to lessen the effects of saturated subgrades and runoff erosion. This will be done primarily by upsizing culverts and constructing paved waterways.

FEMA said it continues to work with the territory on permanent repairs to public buildings as well. Projects obligated this past spring include:

- An obligation of \$7.9 million for the V.I. Economic Development Authority (V.I. EDA) for repairs to William D. Roebuck Industrial Park buildings 1,2,3 and 4 and the perimeter fence on St. Croix. The project includes a Hazard Mitigation Proposal of \$2.9 million.
- Mitigation measures for the industrial park buildings will include:
 - Replacement of roofs with corrugated galvanized steel and roof straps to improve resilience.
 - Replacement of exterior doors with waterproof doors and stainless-steel frames to prevent or minimize water infiltration.
 - Upgrading gutters and downspouts to direct water away from the structures to prevent interior or basement water damage.
- An obligation of \$7.3 million for repairs to the V.I. EDA's Industrial Park Development Corp. building on St. Thomas. The EDA is preparing a final scope of work for review for demolition and replacement plans for the building in Sub Base.

The federal agency said it will continue to leverage its resources with a focus on equitable delivery of its PA program with a focus on the Territory's priorities for a recovery to benefit all Virgin Islanders. "Efforts to protect lifelines, prevent and mitigate potential impacts to them, and building back stronger and smarter during recovery will drive overall resilience of the U.S. Virgin Islands," FEMA said.

This will ensure critical facilities that provide power, water, sewer, wastewater treatment, communications, education, emergency medical care and emergency services are more resistant to the ravages of hurricanes for generations to come.