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With its Own Fleet Deteriorating, Abramson Enterprises Inc. Will Use Government-Owned School Buses in Deal Still Being Negotiated

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Less than a month before public schools open to in-person learning, an agreement between the V.I. Dept. of Education and Abramson Enterprises Inc., which has long provided school bus transportation on St. Croix, has not been reached, though officials are expecting a contract will be signed soon as negotiations are ongoing.

The matter was brought up during a Thursday Finance Committee hearing by Senator Franklin Johnson, who said he was told an agreement had not been reached. Initially, Deputy Education Commissioner Ava Penn said an agreement had been signed. However, she was corrected by D.O.E. Attorney Cynthia Moore, who said negotiations were "ongoing."

Chairman of the Finance Committee, Senator Kurt Vialet, asked Khadila Joseph, director of procurement for the target date to complete negotiations. She said July 1 and added that it was D.O.E.'s hope that the deal could be closed at a Friday meeting.

Ms. Joseph also placed on the record that School Bus Inc., the company that provides school bus services in St. Thomas, has a valid contract through 2024. That company owns its buses.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory asked whether the ongoing negotiations on St. Croix included buses that were purchased with federal dollars. Ms. Joseph said yes and explained that "it is a school bus operation contract" — a special arrangement that allows Abramson Enterprises Inc. to operate the buses.

Seeking clarification, Ms. Frett-Gregory stated, "So we are hiring a contractor to drive our buses? We buy buses with the federal government money to give the buses to a contractor, that's what we doing?"

After receiving confirmation from Commissioner of Education Racquel Berry-Benjamin that that was indeed the case, Ms. Frett-Gregory recalled that the setup was an agreement which preceded the current administration. "It's not your fault; you all came and met it" this way, she said, before asking for the cost of the school buses.

At the time no cost was given, however later in the hearing Senator Javan James asked the same question and Kemo Smith, D.O.E. director of Federal Grants revealed the total cost to be \$1,736,633.00 for fifteen buses.

Ms. Frett-Gregory commented further on the agreement with Abramson Enterprises Inc. "The buses have been sitting for about two and a half to three years. So we are utilizing a contractor to provide their services? Help me commissioner, I am having a hard time with this one."

Ms. Berry-Benjamin said she met the issue and explained, "The Abramson school bus company fleet is deteriorating, we have buses sitting. We came up with a contract for them to utilize the buses to transport our students."

Frustrated, Ms. Frett-Gregory responded, "That's the best we could have done? Because we bought the buses without a plan and when this administration came in, no plan was developed by now, two and half years later, to establish how we are going to utilize those buses in-house."

The senator passionately suggested that D.O.E. hire employees and utilize the buses in-house. "In this [the St. Thomas-St. John] district we have school bus drivers within the Department of Education that provides school bus service to Special Education, correct?" After receiving a response in the affirmative, Ms. Frett-Gregory added, "I am going to leave it right there. I just feel like we have to do a better job of protecting this government. What is happening here is wrong."

The Dept. of Education revealed that it was seeking a three-year contract with Abramson Enterprises Inc. after being asked by Senator Kenneth Gittens about the pending contract's duration. The St. Thomas contract is a five-year deal that was inked in 2019.

According to the Fiscal Year Post Budget Analysis, Governor Bryan has recommended a General Fund appropriation of \$184,438,881 for Fiscal Year 2022 for the V.I. Dept. of Education. Additionally the analysis said, "The Department of Education is in line to also receive \$3,145,654 from Other Funds, \$29,740,728 in Federal Funds for a total funding level of \$217,825,263 for Fiscal Year 2022."

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