

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Not Only Roads, But 'Several Projects' Are Being Held Up By FEMA, O.D.R., Witt O'Brien's and Senators Complain

Disaster Recovery / **Published On February 18, 2022 06:05 AM /**

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Road is blocked by fallen trees in Frederiksted following the passage of Hurricane Maria on St. Croix in Sept. 2017. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

In a rare united front during a Wednesday hearing, individuals responsible for the territory's recovery agreed with one another that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is playing hardball with the government of the Virgin Islands, refusing to give funding clearance to a number of projects.

Among them, senators, the Office of Disaster Recovery and Witt O'Brien's — the latter a government contractor responsible for helping the government navigate federal red tape, secure and draw down on the billions of dollars in aid that resulted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic.

"It seems to me that FEMA plays a game of giving you a hard time every step of the way," Senator Marvin Blyden declared during Wednesday's meeting of the Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure, after learning that guidelines and procedures of the agency are holding up funding for projects.

The committee, which is chaired by Senator Janelle Sarauw, was receiving an update on all capital projects in the territory, their respective contracts inclusive of professional services, and task order contracts both anticipated and underway.

Members of the committee openly expressed their concerns and frustration. Mr. Blyden described the agency with its red tape as the "elephant in the room," and he encouraged committee members to continue the lobbying and advocacy.

Recalling the warning of a congressman when he visited Washington after the 2017 hurricanes, Mr. Blyden said the advice was to understand FEMA's process because it took eight years after Hurricane Sandy and many attempts by U.S. Mid-Atlantic states before funding was released.

Ms. Sarauw ask whether FEMA understood the "urgency of now." Brad Gair, Principal/Senior Managing Director at Witt O'Brien's stopped short of saying no. Instead, he stated, "I wish we could say that we have the level of urgency of what is needed. Again, I feel like we don't and that is a capacity problem on the FEMA side."

Referring specifically to funding for the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center in St. John, Mr. Gair said Witt O'Brien's is close to an agreement because the firm has answered all questions about the project. "They are still asking questions as though they are not convinced on the type of services that are being delivered or have been delivered" at the center, he told lawmakers.

Mr. Gair said everybody knows the services that were being provided at the health center, and FEMA wants to base the grant funding as though it was a small outpatient clinic. "Until they can resolve those types of issues, the approval will continue to linger," he added.

Ms. Sarauw said she understands FEMA's process but she does not agree with it because people are negatively affected.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory questioned whether the V.I. government can sue FEMA, however there was no direct response to her question.

"FEMA is requiring a whole lot of us, so what are we doing as a Virgin Islands team to get this thing approved?" she asked while seeking an update on the payment to waste haulers who rendered their services in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes to clean different areas of the territory.

"We have been sitting on this thing... the waste haulers are yet to be paid after four years," she said. "Do we need to sue them? I am dead serious because this conversation is going on for too long, it's too long."

During the same hearing, Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien said FEMA has declared that 80 percent of the roads in the St. Croix district as well as in St. Thomas-St John district have been determined to be ineligible for FEMA grants.

"In the view of FEMA, they were pre-existing damages, and these roads are not eligible for the [Bipartisan Budget Act Policy of 2018]" or BBA grants. "There is a lack of maintenance records, so these roads have been rendered ineligible," Mrs. Williams-Octalien made known.

"We are in dispute and we have appealed this decision because this process has undergone several steps where the roads were approved then they were denied, then they were approved again, so we have put together with the assistance of Witt O'Brien's the appeals that are currently under review," she added.