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Public Works to Buy New 100 ft. Ferry For St. Thomas-St. John Route With \$5.1 Million Grant

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Dept. of Public Works ferry on the St. Thomas-St. John route. By. V.I. DEPT. OF PUBLIC WORKS

The V.I. Department of Public Works is among 11 U.S. state and territorial agencies chosen as grant winners for the Federal Transit Administration's 2021 Passenger Ferry Grant Program, DPW announced Friday.

Public Works said it will be awarded \$5.1 million to purchase a new 100 ft. ferry, which is expected to improve service reliability and accommodate increased ridership along the St. Thomas-St. John route.

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett also announced the funding Friday. "I am very pleased to announce that the FTA is releasing \$5.1 million dollars to the Department of Public Works for the specific purpose of purchasing a new passenger ferry to increase ridership between St. Thomas and St. John. The importance of reliable transportation between our islands cannot be overstated," she said in a statement. "...I am hopeful that the Virgin Islands' Government will make use of the numerous other funding sources – the American Rescue Plan and especially the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to procure funding for a federally supplemented ferry system between St. Croix and St. Thomas."

Ms. Plaskett thanked U.S. Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg, and his team for the support in getting this funding. "I look forward to the work that Commissioner Gabriel and his team at DPW will do to get this project off the ground swiftly," she said.

"A third, larger vessel that can accommodate 300 passengers is necessary," said DPW Transportation Planner Andrew Ray. "Ridership demands, particularly during the rush hour, cannot be met with the smaller, existing vessels owned by DPW."

According to the release, the Passenger Ferry Grant Program provides competitive funding for projects that support passenger ferry systems in urbanized areas. Funds are awarded based on infrastructure needs and benefit to riders. The ferry service, along this route, serves as a lifeline for St. John residents who travel to St. Thomas for healthcare, employment, education, and other essential services, Public Works said.

"We are super excited for what this means for the territory, more specifically our commuting residents in St. Thomas and St. John," stated DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel. "Passenger ferries are a critical form of public transportation, and this grant will allow us to reduce congestion, and significantly grow our inter-island and commuter ferry service."

DPW said it currently owns two VITRAN branded vessels, which are certified by the U.S. Coast Guard and can hold up to 204 passengers each, including crew. With a new vessel, time constraints can immediately be cut down, and accommodate maintenance in the event a vessel must undergo repairs, the department said.

DPW said it has plans to acquire a vessel for the St. Croix-St. Thomas route in the future.