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Wire Transfers Have Gone Out and Meeting is Set for Thursday, Prompting Waste Haulers to Unblock Entrance of Anguilla Landfill

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A Marco St. Croix heavy equipment operator drove an excavator out of the Anguilla Landfill entrance during the evening time of Wed. July 6, 2022. By. ERNICE GILBERT/V.I. CONSORTIUM

Waste Haulers on St. Croix on Wednesday evening unblocked the entrance to the Anguilla Landfill following daylong negotiations between Gov't House and the haulers that have led to immediate, partial payments via wire transfer.

The haulers and Gov't House officials are scheduled to meet Thursday morning to negotiate further, and the outcome of the meeting could determine whether the protest action continues or

ends.

Shawn Baptiste, owner of Marco St. Croix told the Consortium this evening that he was told payments were wired to accounts. Moments later, one of his employees hopped into the excavator that had blocked the landfill's entrance for the entire day and drove the heavy equipment out of the way.

Bryan administration Chief of Staff, Karl Knight, told the Consortium that a temporary solution had been reached. "These issues with Waste Management are longstanding issues; we're talking monies owed many years back," he said. "Rome wasn't built in a day and of course funding the operation properly so that everybody gets what they think they need to get, that's the challenge. So we're working on that and we ask the haulers to be patient as we try to workout solutions — but at least for today I think we have an understanding of how we can move forward."

On Wednesday morning, the four major waste haulers on St. Croix staged a massive protest action, blocking entry to the Anguilla Landfill and deciding as a group to stop collecting waste throughout St. Croix until payments owed to them by the V.I. government are made.

While a total sum of what is owed to the four haulers was not divulged, Marco St. Croix alone is owed \$23 million dating back to 2017, according to Mr. Baptiste. Bates Trucking, Just Right Trucking and Goldmine Trash Removal are owed large sums as well, according to the owners, who spoke to the Consortium Wednesday morning at the protest site.

The men said they'd exhausted meetings with local officials, including the Waste Management Authority's executive director Roger Merritt, and Governor Albert Bryan. Mr. Bates said Mr. Bryan had promised to pay the waste haulers three months ago, but not a single payment had been made to date.

"We sat down with the governor three months ago and he promised he was going to take care of us. Up to now we haven't gotten nothing," Mr. Bates said.

Mr. Baptiste said they've gotten a lot of promises for payment but those promises have not been kept. "I understand a lot of things is a work in process, but at the end I have nearly 100 employees. That means that's 100 families I have to deal with," remarked Mr. Baptiste, adding that at the end of each week he can't say to his employees that he does not have money to pay them.

"I have to make sure [my employees are covered], so [the government] has to realize that we're running a business just like the government is a business and we need to be treated like a business. We have bills, we have necessities — everybody got their families, everybody wants to live good in the Virgin Islands," Mr. Baptiste stated. He said truckers sometimes feel like they're begging for monies owed to them. "They need to give us some respect. We feel disrespected," he said.

All four company owners said inflation has added to costs across the board — from fuel to parts and equipment, which adds to financial pressure even as the government's debt to the haulers continues to swell. Further exacerbating the problem, Mr. Baptiste said, is an expired contract whose terms haulers continue to operate under, though the contract expired over a decade ago. "They're paying us the same money from then until now," he said, adding that "cost of living has gone up, tires have gone up — many things have gone up."

The haulers had agreed to stop collecting waste across St. Croix and they intend to keep the entrance of the landfill blocked until they are paid, in what amounts to the most aggressive action by haulers to force the government's hand in an effort to bring relief to their companies. Their

meeting tomorrow will determine a path forward relative to the collection of waste.

Senator Novelle Francis was in the area speaking to haulers and making phone calls in search of a solution. Mr. Francis appeared frustrated by the situation, and said the Senate has consistently allocated funds to the Waste Management Authority to fund services provided by the waste haulers. He deemed the matter unacceptable, and said the Bryan administration should make immediate moves to fulfill the government's covenants with the haulers.

Also on the scene was Senator Kenneth Gittens. He too stood with the haulers and said he had been making calls to find a swift solution. "I'm sorry that it came to this for us to give the attention to this situation," he said.

Sammuel Sanes, a former senator and current St. Croix administrator with the Bryan administration, said the government was working to bring a solution to the matter today. "The executive branch is trying to get funding at this time as we speak," he said. "I know that there are contracts that have not been fulfilled, I understand that, and hopefully by the end of today we will be able to come to some type of agreement. That's what we're working on right now."

Mr. Baptiste said his company had won the contract to pave the Melvin Evan's Highway. However, the bonding company he has worked with on other projects refused to provide funding, citing the large sum owed to Marco St. Croix by the V.I. government. "Do you know what happened to the job?" Mr. Baptiste asked rhetorically. "They took it from me and gave it to V.I. Paving.

"Now here it is I am a young businessman within my community trying to build it. These are the things that are knocking me back down where I can't afford to put my business to the next level, and it's a shameful thing."