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First Major School Rebuild on St. Croix in 27 Years Kicks Off With Demolition of Evelyn M. Williams, The New Home of Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School

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Kayra Williams **August 17, 2022**

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Architect's rendering of the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School campus. By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION.

Details relating to the start date of the Evelyn M. Williams school demolition were announced at a press briefing on Wednesday. The event was held jointly with the V.I. Department of Education and the Office of Disaster Recovery.

During the briefing, it was revealed that the \$3 million school demolition project will begin on August 22, making way for construction of what will be the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School.

Speakers at Wednesday's event held at the abandoned Evelyn M. Williams Elementary School site in Estate Paradise included Education Commissioner Nominee Dionne Wells-Hedrington, ODR Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien, and licensed contractors.

Wells-Hedrington said it was a great day for the Dept. of Education as she relayed her elation to be present to kickoff the demolition of the first school rebuild in the territory following the storms of 2017. She said it had taken "a long time to get here," but went on to assure the community that this was just the first of many more to come.

"It's been a long time in negotiations with FEMA," she said. "It's been a long time with us having community meetings to bring the community up to speed with our facility master plan document and all the things we want to see in terms of our facilities moving forward."

According to Wells-Hedrington, it's no secret that public education facilities in the territory were aged and extensive repairs and replacements were needed in some cases.

"For us to be here today really speaks volumes of the work and the commitment of the Virgin Islands Department of Education," she said. "I finally feel that we have something tangible to hold onto. Yes, the vision is on paper but actually bringing it forward speaks volumes. We are kicking this forward today on the big island, and we will be doing the same on St. Thomas and St. John."

Also at Wednesday's event, project architect Chaneel Callwood-Daniels said the community had been engaged in coming up with concepts for the new school. She noted that 3D visualizations were available for viewing on the V.I. Dept. of Education's website. These were also available for viewing at this week's press engagement. Callwood-Daniels said a design build contract was being negotiated.

Eleven Construction is in charge of the school demolition. Project manager John Thompson said the parties involved had "gotten all the hurdles out of the way" and the demo would begin in a few days. Pre-demolition begins on Thursday and on Monday the construction company will be bringing its equipment to the site with a goal of starting work on Tuesday. The demolition will take about 4 months and Thompson said the project should be done somewhere around Thanksgiving or Christmas.

"We've got lots of environmental controls in place to protect the neighborhood and make sure that you guys are safe and that we're not disturbing or distributing too much dust around," he said. "We are very excited to get this project going."

Williams-Octalien, the ODR director, shared her appreciation to have gotten to this point in the recovery of schools in the territory.

"Anyone who's been tracking the recovery of our schools knows it's been an arduous task to actually get to the point to begin to rebuild our first school," she said. "We have gone through a lot of changes, disagreements and negotiations with FEMA for the funding of the first school, and the Arthur A. Richards junior high school has been deemed the first school that will be rebuilt to industry standards."

By industry standards, Williams-Octalien said the new school would rival any school on the mainland with the opportunities available for the children of the Virgin Islands.

"It has been over 27 years since we've built a new school on St. Croix," she added. "We're being very transparent in this process — hence the press conference — so we can advise the neighboring

community of work to be done so they can be prepared.”

In terms of timelines, Williams-Octalien said the project starts with the demolition and will move forward to construction immediately after.

“We’ve finalizing a contract for the construction that will follow immediately after the demolition,” she noted. “We will continue to provide clear updates for the recovery. The Bryan Roach administration has cited schools and the repair of our schools as one of the top priorities for recovery.”

Williams-Octalien emphasized that it had not been an easy task but things had progressed to the point where funding was available to reconstruct schools to a level where they could be resilient in terms of physical structure and what would be taught. The list of additional schools to follow as part of the V.I. Dept. of Education's Educational Facility Master Plan is available on the [ODR website](#). School projects to be undertaken in the future will follow the foundation set by the test case, which is the Evelyn M. Williams Elementary School project.

In terms of costs, in January of this year it was announced that FEMA had awarded \$209.2 million through its Public Assistance Program to rebuild the Arthur Richards school. At Wednesday’s press conference in response to a question from the Consortium, it was revealed that so far the total cost of the project is estimated to be \$162 million. The reconstruction process is slated to be completed in 2 years subject to weather and other conditions. As for repairs and replacements of other schools in the territory, in the words of the Education commissioner nominee, “as fast as FEMA obligates funds, we are ready to go.”