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USVI to Set Bar For Schools Around Caribbean, Education Commissioner Declares as New Arthur A. Richards School Breaks Ground

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Local officials on Thursday, Feb. 23, 2023 broke ground on the new Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School located at the abandoned Evelyn M. Williams Elementary School site in Estate Paradise. By. ALVIN BURKE/V.I. LEGISLATURE

The Arthur A. Richards PreK-8 School project broke ground on Thursday morning, kicking off the over \$209 million reconstruction project.

Present were a number of ebullient officials, all of whom expressed gratitude and pleasure to be at this point today.

"We are really grateful for the opportunity provided to us to not only rebuild but transform the educational system and provide the environment for our children to learn, develop and grow," said Adrienne Williams-Octalien, director of the Office of Disaster Recovery.

"This is just the beginning," Ms. Williams-Octalien declared. "We have gotten a decision from FEMA to rebuild seven schools. One of them I am really proud of is the Claude O. Markoe School in Frederiksted."

The ODR director noted that there were over 200 recovery projects across the territory, with the Arthur Richards project being one of the largest.

Department of Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington was "bursting with emotions" and "bubbling with excitement" as she contemplated the significance of the project.

"This school is no joke. This school will set the bar for schools around the Caribbean," Dr. Wells-Hedrington asserted. "Because now we have the opportunity to build 21st century learning spaces that are conducive for learning, and so we are not taking this lightly."

This school, and the others slated for replacement and upgrades, could serve as a model for other countries in the region, she said. "We are happy to be the trailblazers and we are more than happy to share with all the neighboring islands what we are about to do right here at this site."

With all the schools in the territory already at or beyond the recommended 40-year lifespan, Dr. Wells-Hedrington expressed pleasure that all educational facilities in the USVI would receive much-needed attention.

"We are now at a place where more sites are being qualified to be replaced and that's a very good thing for this territory. We are going to have the opportunity based on the funding that we received to touch every school, whether it be a replacement or a modernization or expansion — every school will be able to be touched and repaired the way that they should," the D.O.E. commissioner said.

Meanwhile, Delegate To Congress Stacey Plaskett recalled the "total devastation" following the 2017 hurricanes, and recounted how she and her colleague from Puerto Rico collaborated to address the issue. "We needed to ask for exponential amounts of money," she said they decided. The pair canvassed legislators in the House and the Senate, making the case that "this made fiscal sense for them, that instead of rebuilding after storm after storm that were inevitable in this country, they should build with resilience."

The resultant elevated funding levels for the replacement of this school and others, Congresswoman Plaskett said, is "what we deserve."

Not only will projects like this result in improved learning facilities for the leaders of tomorrow, but they are also encouraging Virgin Islanders in the diaspora to come home to contribute to the success of these efforts, officials said. Both Ms. Plaskett and Ms. Wells-Hedrington singled out Chenille Callwood, who they say was instrumental in project planning activities, praising her for deciding to lend her professional expertise to the advancement of her home territory. Ms. Plaskett also noted that her son Christian also relocated from the mainland to contribute his knowledge and skills to the construction project.

Governor Albert Bryan Jr., speaking at Thursday's ceremony, highlighted the collective effort it took from everyone involved in the project to get it where it is today. He noted that compromise is

often necessary to ensure that the territory's goals are met. "It's either that, or nothing at all," the Governor noted. "You got to be pushing all the time."

The Department of Education, said the commissioner, will "continue to push" for the transformation of educational centers across the territory.

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