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'A Point of Celebration': After Four Years of Delays and Setbacks, JFL North is Ready For Action

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Governor Albert Bryan, center, flanked on the left by JFL CEO Doug Koch and Lt. Gov. Tregenza Roach on the right, were joined by administration leaders and senators on Tues. March 7, 2023 for the ribbon-cutting of JFL North. By. GOV'T HOUSE

Update: March 8, 2023 at 3:44 p.m.: The Juan F. Luis Hospital Wednesday afternoon issued a release stating that patient transfer to JFL North will begin on March 25th, after CEO Doug Koch said the transfer — barring some caveats — would begin Sept. 25 (See the [11:53 mark of this video](#)).

Original Story: "Some people graduate magna cum laude, summa cum laude. This project? Thank you laude," joked Governor Albert Bryan during his remarks at Tuesday's ribbon-cutting

for JFL North, the modular facility being described as state of the art with medical equipment rivaling mainland hospitals.

The joke was fitting. JFL North received the notice to proceed in July 2018 and was supposed to be completed by the end of 2019. Four years later, after what felt like unending delays and setbacks, the facility is finally ready to begin operations. "I actually ignored this on my calendar. I saw it a couple of weeks ago, I was like, really? It's been a long, tough road," the governor added, reminding the public that the development of JFL North had five CEOs, two governors, two elections and cost \$130 million, which Mr. Bryan said is "the largest project ever completed in the Virgin Islands."

Some of the delays could have been prevented — from [attempting to attach medical gas pipes from the new facility with JFL's current system](#), a decision that failed, and failing to order important hospital furnishings that caused another protracted holdup. Governor Bryan on Tuesday said sometimes leaders must admit when they lack knowledge of certain matters and ask for help — words Mr. Bryan spoke [during a January interview](#) with the Consortium. "I want us to remember the lessons we have learned. You don't know what you don't know. And as leaders, we all have to be humble enough to say we don't know. We haven't built a hospital before... We need to be brave enough to admit to ourselves when it's too much. Like, we need help," he said Tuesday. Yet even as he spoke of these matters, the governor was elated to have finally crossed an important and long overdue milestone.

JFL North, according to hospital CEO Doug Koch, won't see the transfer of patients until at least Sept. 25. "There are a couple caveats with that [regarding] some of the safety issues that we have to take care of before we can move our patients. But if you're not pushing for a date that's when things start to linger, so we continue to push our teams forward," he said during a walkthrough of the hospital Tuesday.

Darryl Smalls, executive director of the Territorial Hospital Redevelopment Team, said there are several more phases before the modular facility can be considered completed, which would then clear the path for demolition of the old hospital for redevelopment. So Tuesday's ribbon-cutting doesn't equate to services being provided immediately, but rather the beginning of equipment transferral along with other operational tools. "The number one priority of the leadership team of JFL, and the redevelopment team, is and always will be patient safety," Mr. Smalls said at the ribbon-cutting.



From left to right: Gov. Albert Bryan Jr., Lt. Gov. Tregenza Roach, Carlotta Luis (daughter of former Gov. Juan F. Luis), and JFL CEO Doug Koch at the JFL North tour on Tues. March 7, 2023.

For Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne L. Williams-Octalien, Tuesday represented "a point of celebration." Considered one of the most persistent and proactive among all government arms in making the territory's recovery from Hurricanes Irma and Maria a reality, the ODR director was blunt about the friction among various recovery arms when trying to move the process forward. "I always say to God be the glory, great things he has done. Let's all be thankful and grateful for where we are today, because if you know the road we have struggled to get to this point, all of you would have a smile on your face because although the road is not done — there's much to do and much to be done — this is a point of celebration."

Mrs. Williams-Octalien revealed that when the modular facility was first obligated in 2018 as a result of the devastating storms of 2017, it was obligated at \$550,000. Additional plans and designs were then put in place and the obligation went up to \$42.7 million. Then when the building was completed, the failure of not putting into the prior plans hospital furnishings led to FEMA to provide more funding which carried the cost to \$75.5 million. The cost eventually grew to \$130 million, executives revealed on Tuesday.

Senator Novelle Francis was overtaken by emotion during his speech. A cancer survivor, the seasoned lawmaker and statesman credited JFL and God for saving his life, a nod to the indelible nature of the medical facility to St. Croix. He congratulated the teams responsible for the the facility's opening, but like other speakers he did not shy away from the reality of the yearslong setbacks.

"Today's ribbon-cutting is the light at the end of a very, very long, dark tunnel," Mr. Francis said. "So long that we were not always sure that we would find our way out. As a member of the Senate Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services in the 33rd Legislature, and as a chair [of the committee] in the 34th Legislature, I sat through many updates on JFL North."

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach used the opportunity to announce that individual health insurance coverage would soon be available in the territory, receiving resounding applause on the announcement. On JFL North, the Lt. governor had the same sentiment of others regarding the modular facility having best-in-class equipment to service Virgin Islanders. However, he was keen to remind that even more important was preventative initiatives such as the promotion of healthy living so that people could stay out of medical facilities.

"But at the same time if you need them they there," he said.

Also attending the event were Senators Diane Capehart, Javan James, Marvin Blyden, Marise James, Samuel Carrion, Kenneth Gittens, and Franklin Johnson. Former lawmakers Kurt Vialet and Alicia Hansen were also in attendance, as well as hospital staff, Bryan administration officials, team members of ODR and employees of the Territorial Hospital Redevelopment Team, among others. The daughter of the hospital's namesake, Carlotta Luis, was in attendance and was recognized.