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Gittens Introduces Bill to Remove Control of Public Libraries From DPNR, Citing Lack of Attention, Resources

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The Office of Libraries, Archives, and Cultural Affairs could become the next government agency if a draft bill to that effect makes its way through the legislative process.

“I’ve submitted a bill draft request to Legal Counsel and the purpose or request for this is to remove and reestablish the public library services from under the DPNR, and transfer its entire operations and functions and services under the Office of the Governor for budgetary purposes only, but as a standalone agency,” said Senator Kenneth Gittens during Thursday’s hearing of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development.

Mr. Gittens says his concern with the status of libraries in the territory is driving the action, as he informed other senators of his intention to submit a bill draft request to Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol. "I strongly believe that our public libraries are not getting the attention it truly deserves being under the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. Not to blame the agency itself, but I think things just get lost," the senator offered as the reason for his legislative efforts.

Mr. Gittens said he's already had discussions with the University of the Virgin Islands, whose Board of Trustees is expected to have governing power over the new office. The office, the senator expects, would be headed by a "qualified individual," if the measure were to become law.

Currently, there are only two library facilities open to the public – the Charles W. Turnbull Regional Public Library in St. Thomas and the Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Challenged in St. Croix. However, access to the facilities is limited; the Turnbull Library is open Tuesday to Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., and Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., while the Regional Library is open Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.. Mr. Gittens is hoping that a new standalone Office of Libraries will remedy the challenges of limited library opening times and speed up repairs of other libraries.

Mr. Oriol, who says he intends to approach the 35th Legislature to ask for additional funding for libraries in the upcoming budget, emphasized that the running of multiple such facilities requires significant funding to properly staff and operate. "Libraries are not largely revenue generating facilities and as most of ours are historic buildings, they require significant maintenance and upkeep," the DPNR commissioner told lawmakers. "I would like to selfishly plug that the 35th Legislature keep this in mind as we approach the upcoming budget season."

Mr. Oriol noted that St. Thomas's Turnbull Library would close for capital repairs in the next several months. The public solicitation for the project was conducted in 2022 and there were two responsive bidders, he shared. He said both estimates received exceeded funds available at the time, and therefore DPNR had to request assistance elsewhere. "We were successful in our application for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, which has been documented to DPP [the Dept. of Property and Procurement]. As such, contract negotiations are ongoing with the contractors and we hope to finalize the contracts and get to construction by May 2023."

Ongoing repair work at other library facilities like the Elaine Ione Sprauve Library on St. John and the Florence Williams Library in St. Croix, are also affecting access for the public.

"Although the issues with our facilities affect our availability to the public, we are in the process of increasing our services," the commissioner said. Repairs to Sprauve are almost complete and a ribbon cutting for the opening of the facility is scheduled for April 14, 2023. The repairs to Williams will continue through June, with an expectation that the facility will open in the summer to partner with summer programs for youth.

According to Mr. Oriol, the Athalie McFarland Petersen Library is not currently receiving construction attention, however it will be as soon as June 23 – DPNR has concluded the solicitation process for the repairs. "The Contractor presently working on the Williams library has been deemed the most responsive bidder and is currently in contract negotiations through DPP to finalize the agreement for the repairs," he assured.

DPNR is also working feverishly to restore function to its Bookmobiles - vehicles retrofitted to serve as mobile libraries, the commissioner reported.

While the St. Croix Bookmobile became operational in February, the department has not had the same success with the buses on the island of St. Thomas. “The broken windshields were finally replaced between December and January. We are currently working with DPW [Department of Public Works] and an outside mechanic to have the buses operational. As we anticipate the closure of the Turnbull Library, it is our goal to fill some of the void with having the bookmobiles in service,” Mr. Oriol said.

In addition to the bookmobiles, DPNR also intends to launch the online library program Hoopla. Hoopla is a web and mobile library media platform that provides library patrons with access to thousands of e-books, movies, audio books, comics, games, and a whole host more. According to DPNR officials, anyone with a valid U.S. Virgin Islands library card will be able to access content on the service once it is launched.

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