

Property and Procurement Announces Major Fee Increase for Vendor's Plaza Occupancy

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The new vendors plaza on the St. Thomas waterfront. By. DLCA

The rent-free occupancy of booths at Vendor's Plaza in Charlotte Amalie will come to an end in October, the beginning of the new fiscal year. That's according to officials in the Department of Property & Procurement, who testified during Thursday's hearing of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection.

Speaking to the issue was Vincent Richards, deputy commissioner, who said that the plan was to begin charging \$3600 a year, a steep increase from annual rental fee of \$200 that was previously charged. Mr. Richards defended the jump in price when Senator Ray Fonseca asked why the fees had gone up by so much. "We believe that it's a fair rate...\$10 a day," said Mr. Richards.

When asked by committee chair Senator Carla Joseph whether any input had been solicited from the vendors regarding the fee increase, Mr. Richards noted that the department has had previous conversations with the vendors, as well as discussions with the president and vice president of their association, though the entire body of vendors had not been formally informed. That, said the deputy commissioner, would take place in the coming months. Mr. Richards also noted that guidelines for both tenants and landlord – the Department of Property & Procurement in this instance – would be drafted during upcoming discussions with the vendors.

Addressing the lack of formal engagement with the wider body of vendors, Mr. Richards explained that more work needed to be done on the plaza, which necessitates the guidance of the Historic Preservation Committee (HPC). Because the structures are made from metal, more accommodations must be made to ward off or mitigate the heat; more sunshades, benches, trees, and other items need to be added to the space. The department wanted to clear the way with the HPC first before bringing all stakeholders together. However, Sen. Joseph pushed back, stressing that it might be better to have all those impacted by the project at the table. The vendors, she noted, would be the department's "biggest advocate" when it comes to pushing for improvements to the plaza.

Property & Procurement Commissioner Lisa Alejandro, in response to Ms. Joseph's queries, said that the department is in discussions to develop a mobile vending area to accommodate food and beverage vendors who have been displaced. A meeting with the HPC on Thursday, August 24, said Mr. Richards, will give the department a better sense of what they are allowed to do.

Not all displaced vendors will be rehoused, however. Mr. Richards noted that some people who had spots in the plaza do not even live in the territory. "I got calls from the continent of Africa," he noted, while others were reportedly skiing in Colorado. "So we made a conscious effort to place the individuals that were there, putting the work in every day."

The shuffle is also helping to put an end to the practice of sub-leasing the booths. While vendors were paying \$200 annually to the Department, some were letting others use their spot and charging \$1000 a month, according to Mr. Richards.

The Dept. of Property and Procurement says it is putting in the work to make Vendors Plaza a more attractive place to work and to shop. "We made an effort to put...new individuals in there that were making...producing items, and selling items produced in the Virgin Islands." According to Mr. Richards, that work is not yet done. "We're going to...pick up the trash, landscape, shade it, and make it someplace that we're all proud of," he declared.