

COMMITTEE UPDATED ON THE STATUS OF HOUSING IN THE TERRITORY

Date : December 13, 2017

St. Thomas - The Committee on Housing, Public Works, Waste Management & Planning, chaired by Sen. Marvin Blyden, held a meeting on Wednesday, at the Capitol Building to receive an update on the status of the condition of housing communities, homelessness and emergency housing post-Hurricane Irma and Maria.

The St. Thomas-St. John District and the St. Croix public housing communities have suffered severe structural damages post-hurricanes. There were approximately 150 public housing apartments that were adversely affected by the storms. The breakdown is as follows: 130 public housing apartments damaged on St. Thomas and 20 wrecked on St. Croix. The estimated cost to repair them is \$20 million.

“It hurts my heart that we do not have any emergency housing in the St. Thomas-St. John District. This is unacceptable. There are no homeless shelters or transitional housing on St. John for displaced residents. Residents who are homeless on St. John are relocated to housing on St. Thomas,” said Sen. Blyden.

“Do you believe we need more emergency housing in the St. Thomas-St. John District?” asked Sen. Blyden. Daryl Griffith, Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority (VIHFA) said, “Yes, unfortunately, the hurricanes highlight the fact that emergency housing stock in the Virgin Islands is inadequate to meet the needs of the population.”

“Can you expound on solutions for providing adequate emergency housing,” inquired Sen. Blyden. Griffith stated that VIHFA has plans to increase emergency housing in both districts. “There are plans to build two emergency apartment complexes on St. Thomas in Anna’s Retreat and Taarneberg, and a vacant multi-unit property will be rehabilitated on St. Croix,” said Director Griffith.

Separately, lawmakers were updated on actions taken by VIHFA and the Virgin Islands Housing Authority (VIHA) to assist newly homeless residents displaced as a result of Hurricane Irma and Maria. Director Griffith stated that due to the severity of the storms, a moratorium is in effect from September 6, 2017, to December 31, 2017.

“VIHFA offered mortgage customers four months’ moratorium on mortgage payments and property foreclosures to all of its borrowers impacted by the hurricanes. Regular payments are expected to resume on January 1, 2018. Residents are still responsible for paying accrued interest at the end of the loan term,” said Griffith. “HUD also offered rent abatements for multi-family

Housing Communities.”

Similarly, Robert Graham, Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Housing Authority stated that HUD distributed 283 Tenant Protection Vouchers (TPV) to pay for the relocation of families formerly housed at Ras Valley and Tutu “Turnkey building. TPV assists residents in getting an apartment with private landlords in the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and the United States. Furthermore, there is an availability of 2,050 Housing Choice Vouchers. To date 1,000 were distributed on St. Thomas and 600 on St. Croix.

“Moving forward, what are the plans to rebuild Ras Valley and Turnkey?” asked Sen. Jean Forde. Director Graham said, “Long-term plans include demolishing obsolete public housing and building better housing with less density designed to meet the needs of families and seniors.”

Sen. Janette Millin Young inquired if the Tutu Hight Rise buildings are condemned. Director Griffith stated that the complex has structural damages, but it is not wholly destroyed. Fifteen families are currently residing there. VIHFA is working on relocating them to a new home.

Senators also received an update from the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority (VIWMA). Geoffrey Watson, Engineering Manager for VIWMA, stated that damage assessments were completed on the wastewater and solid waste facilities and the results are not favorable.

“The sewer line had completely collapsed. As a result, there are sewer lines with leaks or blockages, while others have excess debris that has accumulated after the storms,” said Watson. Additionally, the wastewater facilities such as the LBJ Pump Station was moderately damaged. For the disposal of solid waste, there are bin sites that are operational, but there are challenges. Temporary bin sites are needed, there is a suspension of the house to house services as a result of displaced poles and power lines. Therefore, it hinders VIWMA from collecting and disposing of solid waste.

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