

SENATE COMMITTEE RECEIVE UPDATE ON CAPITAL PROJECTS FROM WMA, DPNR & PUBLIC WORKS

Date : January 8, 2017

ST. THOMAS- The Committee on Housing, Public Works, Waste Management and Planning, chaired by Sen. Marvin Blyden met on Wednesday at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall to receive testimony and current status reports from the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority (WMA), the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), and the Department of Public Works.

Roger E. Merritt, Jr., Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority, assured the body that under his direction, "The Authority will implement several strategies to overcome our current fiscal constraints." Merritt Jr., accompanied by Chief Operating Officer Steve Aubin and Chief Engineer Jim Grum, indicated that a significant percentage of their General Fund appropriation is used to maintain critical operational costs for public health, safety and compliance regulations.

The Waste Management Authority noted their appreciation for the \$1.7 million appropriation by the 31st Legislature, which delayed the implementation of tipping fees and was used to pay outstanding fees to contractors, provide public hearings and informational handouts for the public. The Public Services Commission (PSC) approved the petition for tipping fees on solid waste collection and disposal services on April 20, 2016. The Authority expects to generate \$6.9 million from this plan, that cannot begin until the end of Fiscal Year 2017, due to additional scale-house modifications, weighing scale, compactor repairs and technological systems needed.

The PSC also approved a petition submitted by the WMA to collect special waste fees on electronic waste, freon, lubricating oil and fluorescent light bulbs. The Authority anticipates they will be ready to collect special waste fees by the end of Fiscal Year 2017 and expects to generate \$1.2 million annually. The Wastewater User Fee (Sewer Fee), which is collected with property taxes, falls short of its expected collection of \$3 million annually. To date, the WMA has not received any funds for Fiscal Year 2017, collected \$576,000 total for FY 2015 and \$856,000 total for FY 2016.

Last fiscal year, a petition was submitted to the PSC to for various miscellaneous wastewater operation fees, specifically overdue septage disposal fees. The fees are expected to cover costs of services in an effort to expand and improve services offered to all residents in our territory. In recent news, the District Court approved the motion to remove the remaining wastewater treatment plants from the 1984 Consent Decree, which brings the WMA closer to full termination of the decree. "The Authority continues to search and apply for grants to upgrade the wastewater infrastructure, improve solid waste operations and eliminate public unmanned bin sites in the territory," stated Executive Director Merritt, Jr.

On St. Croix, the Anguilla Landfill is in the process of stabilizing the final slopes of the site, utilizing approximately 160 tons of waste per day and awaiting approval by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for a redesign that will develop 2 years worth of airspace available for new waste placement. Upon completion of capital improvements required by the Consent Decrees, the Bovoni Landfill on St. Thomas will be approved by the EPA for 3 years of airspace available for new waste placement.

The Committee on Housing, Public Works, Waste Management and Planning received testimony from Commissioner Dawn Henry of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources on their ongoing initiatives. The Division of Environmental Protection (EP) recently implemented a new application process that requires all pest companies and applicators to obtain a permit before purchasing Restricted Use Pesticides and specifying where they will be applied in the territory.

The EP officially manages the territory's Clean Water State Revolving Fund program and receives \$4.8 million annually from the U.S. EPA to assist in improving the territory's municipal wastewater facilities and storm water systems. To date, the improvements made thus far have resulted in a reimbursement of \$7 million to the Department and recoupment of \$1.5 million in indirect costs.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife received funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Services for repairs in St. Croix to the Gallows Bay, Altona Lagoon, and Frederiksted docks. All repairs are estimated to be completed by the end of FY 2017. The Division of Coastal Zone Management (CZM) joined efforts with the Virgin Islands Port Authority to expedite the application process by making forms available online.

Commissioner Gustav James of the Department of Public Works provided updates on the status of the major capital projects in progress within the territory. Over 25 major roadway projects are in progress or slated to begin in both districts, notably Veterans Drive and the Moravian Highway on St. Thomas, Bordeaux Mountain and Fish Bay on St. John, along with Mahogany Road and Hamm's Bluff on St. Croix. Commissioner James concluded his testimony by briefly outlining the 5 major non-road projects in progress, such as the St. Croix Fish Market and Fort Christian on St. Thomas.

While commending the testifiers and their employees for their hard work and commitment within their respective agencies, Members of the 32nd Legislature raised serious concerns with the lack of reasonable compensation for employees of the Government of the Virgin Islands.

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