TESTIMONY

Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure
Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Block 2: Department of Planning & Natural Resources

OFFICE OF DISASTER RECOVERY

PRESENTED BY: ADRIENNE L. WILLIAMS-OCTALIEN
DIRECTOR

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Good Afternoon Senator Janelle K. Sarauw, Chairwoman of the 34th Legislature’s Committee on Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure, other members of the Committee, fellow testifiers, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Adrienne L. Williams-Octalien, Director of the Virgin Islands Office of Disaster Recovery. I am joined today by Deputy Director of Finance and Compliance, Mrs. Artra Watlington-Francis. Thank you for the opportunity to provide updates on the Department of Planning & Natural Resources’ recovery projects and initiatives.

The Department of Planning & Natural Resources (DPNR) serves as a critical partner in both managing recovery projects and supporting the Territory’s disaster recovery process. In addition to executing their recovery projects, DPNR certifies that all permits and regulatory responsibilities are met across the Territory.

The Office of Disaster Recovery (ODR) works closely with DPNR to get their disaster recovery projects obligated and completed. As of February 2021, FEMA has obligated thirty-one Public Assistance projects valued at over $13.4M. Out of the thirty-one obligated projects, nine are completed, fifteen are in progress, three have not started, and four are Management Cost projects. DPNR has a remainder of five projects left to be obligated by FEMA, which includes the Enid M. Baa Library on St. Thomas and two libraries on St. Croix, Florence A. Williams and Athalie M. Petersen.

DPNR is the custodian of several of the Territory’s historical and cultural institutions. Funding to restore the Fort Frederik Museum on St. Croix back to its pre-disaster function was obligated on January 19, 2021 in the amount of $6.2M. Understanding the significant importance for DPNR
and the local community, ODR assisted with the development of a solicitation for Architectural and Engineering (A&E) services. The solicitation is currently being reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for submission to the Department of Property and Procurement (DPP) for advertisement.

Likewise, the Fort Christian Museum on St. Thomas is being readied for submission to DPP for advertisement for A&E services.

As our libraries are gateways to knowledge and culture, ODR and DPNR are working together to get all the public libraries in the Territory restored in an expeditious manner once funds are obligated.

The public library projects on the island of St. Croix cover all permanent repairs and contents required for the reopening of both the Florence A. Williams and Athalie M. Petersen Public Libraries. The current estimated cost pending for obligation to execute repairs on these facilities by FEMA is approximately $2.1M. A&E drawings for the Athalie M. Petersen Public Library are 70% complete and the Department of Public Works (DPW) is tasked with finishing the remainder of the facility’s drawings. Once the designs are finalized for both facilities, the project will be submitted to DPP for advertisement. It is anticipated that these projects will be put out to bid in 90 days.

DPNR was obligated $2.9M to restore the Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library back to its pre-disaster condition, which includes the restoration of the facility’s roof, solar panel system, interior components, and mold remediation. With assistance from ODR, the A&E services needed for this
The project will be tasked to the Jaredian Design Group. A kick-off meeting is scheduled for March 9, 2021.

ODR also assisted DPNR in preparing the solicitation package for the obligated Sprauve Library and Museum project on St. John. The project is currently being reviewed by DPW and is expected to be out for solicitation by the end of March 2021. The Enid M. Baa Public Library and Archives project on St. Thomas is moving through the FEMA process and is currently pending obligation.

ODR and DPNR collaborated in getting two projects, the Environmental Enforcement Building on St. Croix and the Charles Turnbull Library Parking Area on St. Thomas, out for advertisement for construction services. The projects were zeroed out for insurance and the agency received the allocated Insurance Proceeds Funds for both projects in January 2021. The St. Croix Environmental Enforcement Building received $77K and the Charles Turnbull Library Parking Area received $240K. A solicitation for the Environmental Enforcement Building repairs closed on March 4, 2021. The Charles Turnbull Library Parking Area project was split into two solicitations. Bid submissions for the electrical lights is scheduled to close on March 11th and the fencing and signage repairs on March 23rd.

DPNR has also been awarded three HMGP Projects. In 2018, FEMA obligated the USVI Post-Disaster Building Code Development project for $7.3M. The purpose of this project is to promote and support a new USVI resilient building code and its compliance within the Territory. DPNR continues to onboard the additional personnel needed to support the process of adherence to the current building code throughout the Territory. This includes ongoing training and professional development and providing support as needed with the implementation of the e-permitting system.
A total of fifteen hires are expected to be part of the DPNR building code team. The grant period of performance ends March 2024.

In 2018, the Regulations and National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) Post Disaster Flood Plain Management project for $960K was also obligated. The DPNR Flood Plain Management program supports the adoption and endorsement of public policies to minimize flood hazards within the Territory. This project will allow for the alignment of regulatory requirements with NFIP guidelines.

The Virgin Islands Rules and Regulation for Flood Damage Prevention was signed by Governor Bryan and forwarded to the Legislature for ratification. DPNR has also made recommended changes to the VI Code Title 29 Chapter 5 relative to flood-related regulations for the Legislature’s approval.

In 2019, FEMA HMGP obligated the Watershed Management Studies for $840K. The project includes the development and execution of eight watershed management studies that are projected to be complete by September 2022. Watershed Consulting Associates LLC. has been selected and data collection has begun. One of the goals of this project is to develop a comprehensive watershed management study. Action steps will include the development of flood mitigation plans and water quality improvement practices. There will be several meetings with stakeholders for needed collaboration.

In addition to projects funded through FEMA, DPNR is also administering recovery funds from other federal sources. The US Department of Commerce awarded the Territory $10.7M to provide
disaster relief for commercial and local fishermen who suffered major losses during the 2017 hurricanes.

To assist DPNR in deploying the program and disbursing funds to the fishermen in need, ODR executed an MOU with the agency to allow access to consultant support and in October of 2020, ODR hired two Program Assistants to support the administration of the program. The addition of personnel has aided fishers in completing applications, addressing deficiencies in already completed applications and identifying the need for additional supporting documents. The program is divided into two parts, Phase 1 not to exceed payments in excess of $5,000 and Phase 2 not to exceed payments over $70,000. To date, DPNR reports indicate that Phase 1 resulted in the acceptance of 259 applications. Two hundred twenty applications were processed totaling $957,500 in payments. In Phase 2, DPNR received 97 applications and processed 54 of them, resulting in $1,667,348 in payments. In total, $2.6M has been paid with an additional $404K in process through the ERP.

ODR continues to meet with DPNR weekly to discuss and track the progress of payments to fishers and to provide assistance as needed. The grant sunsets in July 2023.

DPNR also received $10M from the Department of Interior which is managed by the Historic Preservation Office. These funds have been allocated to restore historical sites damaged by the hurricanes to include restoring Government House on St. Thomas and the Battery on St. John. Program applications are open to the public for funds to repair eligible historic sites. This grants sunsets in March of 2022.
$4.2M in funds has also been made available to DPNR from the NOAA Marine Debris Program to remove hurricane debris ranging from small-scale community clean-ups to large-scale vessel removal throughout the Territory. An RFP for the removal of derelict vessels in both districts was advertised in 2020. The St. Thomas/St. John contract has been executed and the contractor will mobilize in the upcoming weeks to remove 30 derelict vessels in the district. The St. Croix contract has not been executed. Combined contracts total $1.2M, with the remaining $3M allotted for the Krum Bay Cleanup project.

Lastly, DPNR was awarded $4 million for hazardous and solid waste management assistance by the EPA. This award is part of Congressional Disaster Recovery Supplemental for Solid Waste Management. These funds will help address damages caused by the 2017 hurricanes.

In order to effectively coordinate and manage recovery projects and their schedules, ODR confers with DPNR on permitting requirements and statuses for various recovery projects. ODR also coordinates with DPNR through SHPO for FEMA projects that require consultation to progress through FEMA’s Environmental Planning & Historic Preservation (EHP) review. As of March 2021, SHPO is expected to complete consultations for both the DPW St. John Building, which houses the VITEMA St. John EOC, and the Evelyn Williams School that is slated to be demolished.

Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. This concludes ODR’s update on the status of DPNR’s recovery projects and bringing historical and cultural facilities back online. We look forward to DPNR’s continued partnership in facilitating resilient recovery projects across the Territory. My team and I are available to answer any questions you may have.