



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

-----0-----

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

4611 Tutu Park Mall  
Suite 300, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
St. Thomas, VI 00802  
(340) 774-3320

45 Mars Hill, Frederiksted  
St. Croix, VI 00840  
(340) 773-1082  
dpnr.vi.gov



Office of the Commissioner

May 26, 2024

Senator Milton E. Potter  
Chair, Committee on Disaster Recovery  
Infrastructure and Planning  
35<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands  
St. Thomas, VI 00802

**RE: 2024 UPDATE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING & NATURAL RESOURCES**

---

Good day Senator Potter, Chair of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature's Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning, other committee members, non-committee members and legislative staff present, and members of the viewing and listening public, my name is Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Commissioner for the Department of Planning & Natural Resources (DPNR). We are present today to present the following updates at the Chair's request:

- General update on different divisions within the Department;
- Update on the funding for Potable Drinking Water Line replacement;
- The relocation of the St. Thomas main office to the Sub Base/Crown Bay location;
- General office space issues;
- Projects undertaken; and
- Update on the Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan

It is quite difficult to give a general update on the Department as there are 14 different divisions within DPNR, each with its own mandate; however, our core issues remain the same - not enough money or staffing to run optimally - but we are doing alright with what we have. My Permits division has processed ~ \$150M in construction applications this fiscal year, we have collected \$160k in violations, the GVI has expended \$3.34B in recovery projects, which means my CZM, SHPO, DEP and DFW teams have processed that many NEPA clearance requests... yet the focus often is not where we are or what we have done; rather, the focus is always on where we are not. It is impossible to catch all the violations, certainly less achievable without the assistance of the public. It is also necessary to temper expectations, as those who do bring violations to the attention of the Department want the outcome that they want - DPNR does not have the authority to knock down all or part of a structure that is noncompliant just because you reported it. Everything is a process, and some portions of the process are outside of the realm of DPNR.

Despite the challenges that the Department faces, we have had a number of successes and continue to make progress in all our divisions. Some include another successful VI Council of the Arts season, where we had wonderful poetry out loud school, district and then territorial, competitions where Ms. Isabill Thill of Antilles School was chosen as the winner and represented the Territory in the National competition in April; we also had another successful year of the Folklife Festival (although this year is was held in March). Our Division

of Environmental Enforcement has been on full display recently after receiving our marine assets and being able to provide support, as well as respond to several in-water operations. In April we received the two newest vessels in our fleet – two 8m Metal Craft vessels, tailor-made for our ocean waters; we also were able to launch our rapid response vessels (wave runners) which we have used to provide support to the different carnival activities, as well as last weekend over on Honeymoon Beach, Water Island. Our Permits division is finalizing the launch of our electronic permitting system for June 2024, all while continuing to meet the increasing demand for processing building applications. Our Planning Division continues to process business license applications in accordance with the 10-day requirements for the DLCA, and on numerous occasions have represented the Department well to this body, presenting our findings on rezoning requests. The Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums has now opened two libraries to the public – the Florence Williams Public Library on St. Croix, and the Elaine Ione Sprauve Library on St. John – with extended hours and hours on Saturdays. The Division of Coastal Zone Management completed its contract for the removal of derelict barges in Krum Bay, completed several coastal cleanup events across the Territory with many partners, and continues to process all federal consistency requests for disaster recovery projects. Our Division of Fish and Wildlife has been working diligently to bring aquaculture and mariculture to the USVI by working on our strategic plans and working with different councils to have rules and regulations for this industry established; DFW has also partnered with UVI for the restoration of fisheries habitats through the creation of artificial reefs, and has processed \$1.2M in reimbursement payments to fishers impacted by the 2017 storms, bringing our overall payout to fishers to \$7.5M. Our State Historic Preservation Office continues to push our Historic Recovery and Rehabilitation Program, disbursing ~ \$5M in funding thus far. And lastly, our newest division – Territorial Parks and Protected Areas – has brought on board two key staff members, received/partnered on three grant awards totaling \$2.6M, and have a number of grant award proposals in process.

### Challenges

Like all GVI departments, our challenges are about resources, both human and financial. Where we may have the federal resources to hire new individuals, we have struggled to fill those vacancies, which results in us not being able to provide all the services we would like to. A major struggle is the lack of funding to hire additional personnel in the non-federally funded divisions.

This concludes the general updates for the divisions; below I will respond to some of the specific requests made in the invitation.

### Potable Drinking Water Line Replacement

DPNR's Division of Environmental Protection is responsible for disbursing drinking water infrastructure grant funding. In FY 2024, DEP has reimbursed VIWAPA \$537,556, and currently awaiting liquidation is payment in the amount of \$764,333; we also are reviewing a payment package in the amount of \$2,509,756; thus, through three quarters of the fiscal year, we will have provided funding in the amount of \$3,811,645 for drinking water infrastructure upgrades. In addition to VIWAPA, DEP has also obligated an additional \$566,815 in funding to other potable water providers throughout the territory.

### Capital Projects in Process

The Department has several projects in process right now, and a few others that we are attempting to bring through the contracting phase. They are as follows:

**Hull Bay Vessel Launch Ramp** – the Department released an Invitation for Bid (IFB) for the removal and replacement of the 120’ six-inch (6”) concrete slab ramp. Two bids were received, one for \$6M, one for \$4M. We will be placing the project out for bid once again in short order.

**Quetel Fish Market Repairs** – the Department released an IFB for capital repairs to the Quetel Fish Market in Frenchtown, St. Thomas. The bid from Caribbean Contracting Services in the amount of \$229,537.50 has been accepted, and we are awaiting the finalization of the contract by the Department of Property and Procurement and anticipate work beginning by July 1, 2024.

**Charles W. Turnbull Capital Repairs** – the Department entered into a contract with Four Start Construction for the repairs to the Turnbull Library on June 12, 2023. The Notice to Proceed was issued in July 2023 and the Contractor began work in August 2023. The Contractor currently estimates the completion of the renovation to occur by September 2024.

**Enid Baa Capital Repairs** – the Department entered into a contract with Custom Builders for the repairs to the Enid Baa Facility on February 20, 2024. The Notice to Proceed has been issued for June 19, 2024, so we expect to see activity there shortly. The repairs will take approximately one year to complete.

**Athalie M. Petersen Repairs** – the Department entered into a contract with Heights Construction for the repairs to the Petersen Library on July 16, 2023. The Notice to Proceed was issued in September 2023 and work commenced in October 2023. Work is presently stalled at the facility due to change orders for improvements not covered by the FEMA funds. We anticipate work to resume in June as change orders have been signed off on and the Contractor awaits materials to arrive on-island to begin the work.

**DPNR Relocation to Sub Base/Crown Bay Area** – The design/engineering plans to rehabilitate the Sub Base building into office space for DPNR was completed in early-December 2023, and the engineer’s estimate was completed in late-December. Due to the engineer’s estimate being 2.5 times higher than anticipated, DPNR worked with the CIP Division of Public Works to break the rehabilitation into phases. Phase 2, which consists of rehabilitating the exterior shell and roughing in utilities is currently out for bid and will close on June 17, 2024. DPNR has not been able to identify funds beyond what we have currently secured, but we are exploring all avenues. If funding were made available that could complete the project, the rehabilitation would take approximately two (2) years.

Discussion on the Sub Base building provides a good segue on the issues we are facing in our STT main office. In September 2023, DPNR spent \$200k on mold remediation in our office spaces. Shortly afterwards, the chiller unit servicing the offices stopped functioning, and our landlord at the time, Viya, did not immediately address the situation. We spent over \$12k on portable a/c units, had to put personnel on shifts, have had to close the office on several occasions, until the materials to make the chiller unit functional once again were obtained. And please understand – the fact that the chiller unit is functional does not mean it is in good working order; the vendor has advised that it needs to be replaced in its entirety. Now we add in the power outages due to insufficient generation capacity by VIWAPA, and the fact that our landlord’s generator has been experiencing issues, this has also added complication to

having a stable work environment. As we are leasing the space we are in, we have little control over these situations, so bottom line is – the sooner we can get into our own office space and control our equipment, the better off we will be.

The last thing I will mention before pausing to take questions is the status of the Comprehensive Land and Water Use plan. DPNR will be releasing a draft of the plan within the next two weeks. Beginning today (June 3) we are having three working sessions with the working groups on all three islands to finalize the draft plan which will go out for public comment. Beginning the week of June 24, DPNR will be hold three more town hall meetings, one on each island, to once again obtain public input. Our goal is to have a final Comprehensive Land and Water Use plan by August 2024.

This concludes my broad overview of the Department. I'm happy to take any questions at this time.