

2024

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TESTIMONY



COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION,
AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS

AUGUST 28, 2024

COMMISSIONER DEREK GABRIEL





INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Senator Marvin Blyden, Chairperson of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications; committee members; all other senators in attendance today; those seated in the Senate chambers; and those in the listening and viewing audience.

I am Derek Gabriel, the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Public Works (DPW). Deputy Commissioner of Transportation Karole Ovesen-McGregor and Highway Program Manager Jomo McClean are with me today. Thank you for allowing us to give an update on transportation matters in the territory, including the status of roads, road projects, and public transportation, including bus and passenger ferry services.

The department is managing several projects throughout the territory. The following is a snapshot of some of those projects.

Ethel MacIntosh Memorial Drive (Mahogany Road)—This project recently received bids, and we are awaiting the Federal Highway Administration’s (FHWA) concurrence to award and execute a contract. The scope of work for this project calls for 5.65 miles of existing roadway rehabilitation, culvert replacements, retaining wall repairs, guardrail replacement, signage improvements, striping, and installation of drainage swales. This contract is anticipated to be executed in September, and construction will begin in October of this year.

Clifton Hill Connector Road/Melvin Evans Highway-Container Port Intersection Phase I (Route 75/Route 66) - The road construction contractor, Grace Civil, is approximately 80% complete. Work is expected to resume within two weeks, and construction on the original contract is anticipated to be completed in two months. This project includes significant road reconstruction, asphalt paving, roadway widening, striping, drainage, construction of turn lanes on Melvin Evans Highway, new signalization, waterline relocation, and utility pole relocation. This contract also includes repairing the streetlights on Melvin Evans Highway from Williams Delight to Sunny Isle. A supplemental contract was executed for this additional work, which is now underway. The contractor has completed the assessment of the streetlight system from Williams Delight to Sunny Isles. The crew has completed most of the new concrete meter bases and installed conduits and conductors. They are awaiting the shipment of the latest poles to the island to energize the new system. We anticipate energizing all streetlights within this segment by December of this year.

VI STX (001) - This project, managed by Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division (EFLHD), is a Design Bid Build (DBB) project for the installation of temporary bridges at Queen Mary Highway – Route 70 and Route 669 (east of Agriculture Fair Grounds). The Contractor, Custom Builders, has substantially completed the **Queen Mary Bridge** except for some additional flashing signs. The roadway was reopened on July 24, 2024.

Eastern Federal Lands has issued a Notice to Proceed to Custom Builders to begin working on the **Route 669 Bridge**. Construction is estimated to be completed by the first week of February 2025, and the roadway will open to traffic.

VI ST ER STX (003)—This project, managed by the Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division (EFLHD), is a Design-Build project that includes sixteen damaged sites throughout the island. Some sites are Midland Road Bridge, East Airport Road Bridge, Lagoon Bridge, Concordia Road, East End Road, and North Shore Road. Construction for four roadway sites and all the culvert sites is now complete.

The permanent replacement for the **Altona Lagoon Bridge** is under construction, and precast girders have been installed. The contractor began working on the bridge decking and poured the deck last week. Weather permitting, this bridge will be completed in September 2024.

The permanent replacement for the **East Airport Road Bridge** remains under construction and is anticipated to be completed by the end of September 2024. The Contractor recently finished installing the precast arched girders and has begun working on the bridge deck.

With the opening of Queen Mary Highway, the **Midland Road Bridge** was closed at the end of July 2024. Construction and installation of the new bridge are expected to be completed in March 2025.

Permanent Traffic Signs-STX—This project involved installing new traffic and regulatory signs throughout the island of St. Croix. The contractor, Celestine Construction, has installed new signage throughout the island, which is 95% complete. The contractor has indicated that the last batch of signs to be installed will arrive on the island in two weeks. This contract will be completed and closed by early October.

Melvin Evans VI-66(13)—VI Paving was awarded this last segment of the Melvin Evans Highway, which runs from Good Hope to William's Delight. This project is more than 90% complete, with the remaining punch list items, such as signage, additional guardrails, and drainage adjustments having to be addressed. The scope of work included road



EAST AIRPORT BRIDGE



NORTHSIDE ROAD



DOWNTOWN CHRISTIANSTED



ALTONA LAGOON BRIDGE



QUEEN MARY HIGHWAY



WHIM NEIGHBORHOOD ROADS

reconstruction, striping, drainage rehabilitation, signs, guardrails, highway street lighting, and other miscellaneous work.

Frederiksted Roads – GARVEE - The bid construction documents are now complete. We anticipate receiving FHWA's concurrence to advertise in September. Once received, we will begin the solicitation process.

First Avenue Drainage Improvements—This project was recently awarded to Island Roads Corporation and is currently 30% complete. The Contractor has commenced installing new curbs and gutters on the north side of First Avenue, moving from east to west. They are also installing new inlets and cross drainage as they proceed westward. This project is funded by Act 8454 and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Work is expected to be completed in April 2025.

Charlotte Amalie Town Drainage Improvements—This project was recently awarded to Island Roads Corporation and is currently 28% complete. Island Roads has begun clearing and cleaning the swales and v-gutters on Crystal Gade, Bred Gade, Nye Gade, Raadets Gade, and Back Street. The Department of Labor and Griffith Park continue work on the transition boxes, catch basins, and drainage pipes. Contract work is expected to be completed in April 2025. This project is funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

The **CHRISTIANSTED ROADS** repair project commenced in March 2024. It is being executed in phases. Phase 1 consists of Prince Street, Hill Street, Queen Street, and East Street. Phase 2 consists of King and West Street. Phase 3 consists of Peter's Farm Road, New Street, Smith Street, Strand Street, Queen Cross Street, and Hospital Street. Department of Interior and ARPA funds were used for this project.

The department continues to work on several **DISASTER RECOVERY PROJECTS** that are currently in the construction phase. Their scope of work consists of road repairs and drainage improvements to the various sites.

The **Water Island Watershed Project** was completed in April this year. Sites included the parking lot, Honeymoon Beach, Overdown Road, Flamingo Road, and Providence Hill. The total cost of the project was \$2,864,223.50. The St. Thomas Watershed Project, which includes slope stabilization and replacing retaining walls, is about 70% completed. Sites included in this project are Botany Bay 1 and 2, Frenchman's Bay, and Cabrita Point. The total contract amount is \$2,493,575. The **St. John Watershed Project** consists of thirteen (13) sites across the island, including Susannaberg, Pocket Money, Francis Bay Hill, Coral Bay, Adrian Hill, and Pastory. The project is about 30% completed and has a total contract amount of \$3,942,078. The **Mount Pleasant Project** on St. Croix started construction in March of this year and is approximately 30% complete. The scope of work involves one site and includes road reconstruction and drainage improvements. The total contract amount is \$1,604,096.50.

We are awaiting contract execution for the Airport Road Repair Project on St. Croix. The scope includes repaving the entire route to and from the airport, from East Airport Road to West Airport Road intersections on the Melvin Evans Highway. We anticipate construction to begin in October 2024. This project is funded by the Transportation Trust Fund.

Other road repair projects underway include:

- Various sections of the Queen Mary Highway. Paving is about 75% completed.
- Various sections of Northside Road. Paving 100% completed.
- Lastly, two sites in the Whim neighborhood. Paving is completed.

Striping for all three projects, which are funded by ARPA and the Transportation Trust Fund, is scheduled for October 2024.

The Division of Transportation's **FERRY TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM** has one new 300-passenger vessel under construction. It is ADA-accessible and has dedicated space for luggage. This 100 ft. ferry, fabricated by Gulf Craft, will service Cruz Bay and Red Hook, along Route 32M, during peak hours and high-demand periods. Construction started in



FIRST AVENUE, STT



HISTORIC DISTRICT DRAINAGE PROJECT , STT



THE SPIRIT OF 1733 - VITRAN FERRY



VITRAN



ELECTRIC VITRAN VAN

February of this year and is roughly 50% completed. The Department intends to issue an RFQ to both ferry franchisees to determine who will operate the new vessel. The department is also looking for revenue-sharing opportunities and will evaluate the operation of the current GVI-provided ferries as part of the RFQ.

The Department continues to research and discuss funding opportunities with Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, and the U.S. Department of Transportation for two ferries for Route 753M, which runs between St. Croix and St. Thomas. DPW recently received a conceptual design and revised cost estimate, which will significantly assist the Department in this effort. The Territory's ferry program is one of the oldest in the country and underscores the significant challenges we have in linking our islands due to geographic challenges. We have made significant strides in gaining support for the program from our federal partners and will continue exploring all available options for technical and funding support opportunities. Our ferry operators have done their part by uploading critical passenger information to the National Census of Ferry Operators (NCFO). This data is necessary to make our case on the federal level for enhanced subsidies and support.

VITRAN is utilizing an **"INNOVATIVE PROCUREMENT"** method established by the Federal Transit Administration to secure better pricing and faster delivery of transit vehicles. This method utilizes larger, statewide contracts negotiated for larger quantities to provide better pricing. These contracts are available for other FTA funding recipients to make smaller purchases at previously established pricing to accelerate the procurement process. "Innovative Procurement" is a cooperative agreement or what was previously called "piggybacking." With the new bus procurement contract in the execution process, VITRAN will acquire new fixed-route and paratransit buses over the next fourteen (14) months.

VITRAN FLEET			
	FIXED-ROUTE	PARATRANSIT	TOTAL
OPERATIONAL	12	19	31
NON-OPERATIONAL	7	9	16
	19	28	47

*Of the 16 non-operational buses/vans, 4 are slated for disposal.

VITRAN plans to transition its fleet from fossil fuels to hybrid and electric buses. In April 2024, two new electric vans, funded by the Virgin Islands Energy Office, were introduced to the fleet. VITRAN will continue this path by purchasing electric service trucks and supporting vehicles. Maintaining the current fleet of diesel-operated vehicles continues to be difficult, with bus manufacturing facilities closing and the lack of needed parts.

Many of the existing **BUS SHELTERS** in the territory were severely damaged by hurricanes Irma and Maria. Several projects are currently in solicitation to retrofit and refurbish 43 bus shelters: 25 on St. Croix, 14 on St. Thomas, and four on St. John.

In late 2024, the Division of Transportation will issue an IFB for the Transit Plan Update, with a kickoff scheduled for early 2025. This update will include evaluating our existing routes, possibilities for new routes, route realignments/expansions, and analyzing the feasibility of transfer stations to serve the community better. The Transit Plan Update will also analyze main traffic generators such as schools, housing communities, and planned private and public developments. Innovative transit services such as Microtransit will also be evaluated for their feasibility and ability to expand our public transit services to new areas.

That completes our testimony for this segment of today's session.

Good afternoon, Senator Marvin Blyden, Chairperson of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications; committee members; all other senators in attendance today; those seated in the Senate chambers; and those in the listening and viewing audience.

I am Derek Gabriel, the Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Public Works (DPW). The department is pleased to provide testimony today on telecommunication issues impacting the territory and an update on the status of present infrastructure projects.

DPW plans and coordinates at the project level, meeting with the Office of Disaster and Recovery bi-weekly and individually with each utility (WAPA water, WAPA power, the Waste Management Authority, VINGN, and Liberty) to coordinate upcoming projects. The department also meets with Liberty weekly to conduct workshops to review permit applications before submittal to expedite the approval process and avoid lengthy resubmissions. We have made significant progress via this effort over the last month.

As for projects, DPW is coordinating with Liberty to install underground fiber in the Mt. Pleasant community. This will result in a seamless installation concurrent with our FEMA road rehabilitation project.

VINGN is coordinating with DPW to interconnect its network with Liberty's on St. Thomas. The excavation permit is pending, and work is expected to be completed in the coming weeks. DPW is working with all parties to foster a cooperative relationship between the territory's communications providers and is encouraging communication providers to leverage each other's infrastructure to provide better service and minimize impact to our roadways.

Thank you again. My team and I stand ready for questions.