



COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS

February 28, 2025

Good day, Senator Marvin Blyden, Chairman of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications; committee members; all other senators in attendance today; all 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). With me today are Assistant Commissioner Rueben Jennings, Deputy Commissioner of Transportation Karole Ovesen-McGregor, and Federal Highway Program Manager Jomo McClean.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Department of Public Works' ongoing efforts to improve and enhance infrastructure, the status of transportation programs, and cemeteries across the U.S. Virgin Islands. We are making significant strides in road rehabilitation, drainage improvements, bridge construction, and public transportation programs. We are pleased to highlight key achievements and ongoing projects demonstrating our unwavering commitment to building a more resilient and sustainable transportation network for our residents and visitors. While my team and I testified before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on February 18, 2025, today will allow us to have a deeper discussion focused on this department.

First, let me congratulate our 2025 Employees of the Year. On St. Croix, we have Mr. Brian Hendrickson from the Division of Operations and on St. Thomas, we have Mr. Kelvin Pickering from the Division of Transportation, VITRAN. These employees were nominated by their managers and peers for their commitment to professionalism, customer service, teamwork, innovation, and leadership. We thank them for being shining stars in the department.

PROJECT UPDATES – ST. CROIX DISTRICT

Over the past year, the Department of Public Works has continued our substantial progress in maintaining and rehabilitating our transportation infrastructure throughout the territory.

St. Croix Bridge Projects

The permanent bridge on East Airport Road officially opened to traffic on February 3, 2025, and the temporary Route 669 Bridge adjacent to the Agricultural Fair Grounds reopened on February 14, 2025, just in time for AGRIFEST 2025. These bridges now join the list of re-opened bridges, along with the Altona Lagoon and the Queen Mary Highway Bridges. Work on the remaining bridge continues. It is anticipated that construction will be complete by September 2025. The bridge projects are managed by Eastern Federal Lands, a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) division within the U.S. Department of Transportation. DPW is a liaison between the FHWA, local contractors, and the community.

Ethel McIntosh Drive

The Notice to Proceed was issued to Marco St. Croix on January 27, 2025, and a pre-construction meeting was held on February 3, 2025. The contractor has already started grubbing and clearing certain areas in anticipation of significant scope items beginning in March 2025. The project scope includes pavement rehabilitation for the entire Ethel McIntosh Memorial Drive, drainage improvements, retaining wall reconstruction, guardrail replacement, signage, and striping, with an estimated completion date of September 2026.

Clifton Hill Connector Project

This project is in its final phase, with dedicated turning lanes on Melvin Evans Highway and paving scheduled for completion by April 2025. Most utility relocation has been completed. The streetlight repairs are approximately 80% completed, with approximately 100 poles remaining to be installed once delivered. The Contractor expects to receive the new poles and complete installation in the next three months (May 2025). We anticipate full completion of all scope items by July 2025.

Airport Road

Work on Airport Road began on December 9, 2024, and is about 70% completed. The project includes milling, paving, and striping of the three-mile-long roadway. West Airport Road has been milled and paved, while sections of East Airport Road remain. We

anticipate that this project will be closed out in March 2025. This project was awarded to Marco St. Croix.

Christiansted Roads

In Christiansted, DPW Contractor - VI Paving, Inc. - completed all Phase 2 roads except for King Cross Street. The roadways included in Phase 2 of this project were Queen Cross, King, Strand, Queen, New, West, and Smith Streets. This project included milling, minor drainage improvements, resurfacing, and striping.

Frederiksted Roads

We have recently initiated the solicitation process for the GARVEE Frederiksted Roads project. The project includes minor drainage improvements, pavement milling, resurfacing, and striping of Queen, King, and Strand Streets.

St. Croix VITRAN Maintenance Building, Phase 2

The original contract for this project was terminated on October 28, 2024. The project is now out for re-solicitation. A pre-bid meeting and mandatory site visit occurred on January 31, and the solicitation will close on February 28, 2025. We expect construction to resume in August 2025.

Welcome to St. Croix - Sign and Landscaping Project

The department recently solicited a project to design, install, and maintain a welcome sign and decorative landscape at the East Airport Road intersection on St. Croix. The solicitation closed on February 14, and a contractor will be selected next. This project aims to enhance the area's aesthetic appeal and provide directional information.

PROJECT UPDATES – ST. THOMAS/ST. JOHN DISTRICT

Veterans Drive Improvements Phase 2A

This project proposes to widen and revitalize Veterans Drive to provide a tree-lined, four-lane, divided roadway with a waterfront pedestrian promenade that simultaneously

addresses Charlotte Amalie's congestion and failing infrastructure problems while creating a signature pedestrian-friendly environment. The proposed work will cover an area from the west of Tolbod Gade (Vendors Plaza) to Hospital Gade (Fort Christian Parking Lot). This project will be managed by the Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division, a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) division within the U.S. Department of Transportation. The bid documents have been reviewed and are now complete. Eastern Federal Lands has submitted the acquisition plan for certification and approval to the Federal Lands Headquarters. Once approval is obtained, they will begin the solicitation process.

Veterans Drive Resurfacing (Segments)

This project includes patching, milling, paving, and striping (to include crosswalks) on segments of Veterans Drive, from Emile Griffith Park eastward to the bus stop at the southwestern end of the Fort Christian Parking Lot. About 50 percent of the work is completed. DPW anticipates having this maintenance project complete in March 2025.

First Avenue Roadway and Drainage Improvements

Work continues on this project by the Contractor, Island Roads. This past month, the contractor installed 213 linear feet of curb and gutter, two drop inlet catch basins, and two 12" diameter drainage pipe laterals on the north side of the road in Work Zone No. 9. The contractor completed the placement of asphalt in Work Zones Nos—7 and 8, which extends between 2nd and 4th Street. Traffic has been diverted between 1st and 2nd Streets, and the road is currently open to vehicular traffic from 2nd to 10th Street. The contractor is currently working in Work Zone No. 9, which extends between 1st and 2nd Streets. This project is approximately 59% complete; however, due to challenges with the failing Waste Management infrastructure in the area, we anticipate extending the project to Fall 2025 via a change order.

Charlotte Amalie Town Drainage Improvements

Work continues on this project by the Contractor, Island Roads. This past month, the contractor replaced the damaged box culvert at the intersection of Raadets Gade and

Wimmelskafts Gade (Back Street). Crystal and Raadets Gade were paved. Island Roads continues to clear and clean the swales and v-gutters on Raadets and Crystal Gade. Island Roads re-pointed and repaired 46 square yards of blue bit stone v-gutters swales on Crystal and Raadets Gade, along with some segments of Wimmelskafts Gade. This project is approximately 55% complete. Again, due to challenges with the failing Waste Management infrastructure throughout downtown Charlotte Amalie, we are negotiating a change order with the contractor to extend the project through Fall 2025.

Additional Road Maintenance – St. Thomas

During the first and second quarters of 2025, the department will undertake minor drainage improvements, pavement milling, resurfacing, and striping several segments of roadways on St. Thomas. These areas include segments in Scott Free, Coki Point, Contant, and Caret Bay, to name a few. Unfortunately, we are not prepared to share start or end dates for these areas today, but we will publicly share a comprehensive schedule of upcoming road maintenance projects in the coming weeks.

Fort Christian Parking Lot Renovations

The Fort Christian Parking Lot Renovations Project involves trenching, installing waterlines and valve boxes in the southern area of the lot, milling, paving, and striping. This project is scheduled to be completed in early April 2025, ensuring the parking lot is ready for use before the 2025 Carnival festivities. DPW contractor - Grace Civil, LLC - has substantially completed trenching and installation of new water lines for the Carnival booths. They are now installing valve boxes and will move on to milling and paving next. Once complete, this project will also include EV charging pedestals and new automated payment booths, bringing the parking lot into compliance with ADA standards.

Leonardo Trotman Drive

The design for this project is finalized. We revised the bid package to reflect the project's current budget. The revisions will connect the new roadway from the Weymouth Rhymer Highway to the rear of the Tutu Park Mall and Charles W. Turnbull Regional Library.

Fish Fry Drive

The department was awarded a FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant to effectuate improvements along this area of Cruz Bay. The department has contracted a Design Consultant, who is currently designing the proposed solutions to alleviate flooding along this roadway, including nature-based solutions where applicable. Once the proposed design concept has been completed, it will be submitted to FEMA for review and approval of construction funds for this project. In the interim, the department will perform maintenance resurfacing in the upcoming months.

Centerline Road (Segments)

Before the end of May, the department will begin minor drainage improvements, pavement milling, resurfacing, and striping of several segments of roadways along Centerline Road and East End Road on St. John. These dates are subject to the contractor's availability to mobilize to St. John, pending completion of other projects on St. Thomas.

Johnny Horn Trail

DPW's Engineering Division is developing a scope of services and project manual for a design-build solicitation for this roadway's road and drainage design. DPW understands the importance of this project and has made it a priority among the department's other transportation projects.

Cruz Bay Restrooms

The design-build solicitation began on January 12, 2024, and a pre-bid meeting and site visit were scheduled for January 22, 2024. Bids were submitted by February 29, 2024, and the evaluation process occurred on March 8, 2024.

The Evaluation Committee discussed the lack of competition, only receiving one proposal, the respondent's lack of relevant experience in construction, and the overall cost being over the agency's budget. The committee agreed that DPW would revise the scope of work and

solicit this project again to obtain more competition and comprehensive proposals. We anticipate the project being re-solicited in March 2025.

TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVES

Transit Study

The department is soliciting a qualified firm to deliver a detailed Comprehensive Planning Transit Study (CPTS) or Comprehensive Transit Operational Plan Analysis that evaluates, improves, and expands DPW's public transportation system within the Virgin Islands. This study will help the department to align with modern transportation needs, ensuring operational efficiency and enhancing accessibility and safety. This project will also include a feasibility study for a transit transfer station and Micro Transit Service. The study will provide a strategic framework to enhance ADA transit services, ferry boat transportation, public bus services, and coordination with traffic light control systems. It also complies with Federal Transit Administration (FTA) procurement regulations and includes strategies to maximize the effectiveness of our federal funding.

Transportation Master Plan Update

Under this task order, our Consultant, WSP, will undertake the agreed scope to develop the 2050 Comprehensive Transportation Master Plan. They will collect recent data, evaluate projects completed from previous efforts, prioritize projects, and update the recommendations presented in the 2040 Comprehensive Transportation Master Plan. DPW staff will aid in identifying potential sources of relevant information, including the primary public and private agencies, and contacts within the individual agencies. WSP will use the existing conditions data to project future conditions, which will forecast the 2050 transportation demands, and then use the demand forecast to identify the necessary transportation infrastructure improvements that will address the projected future transportation impacts. In 2021, the USVI passed Bill No. 34-0087 (USVI Complete Street Act of 2022), providing for a Complete Street Policy and creating a Complete Street Taskforce within DPW to aid in the development and implementation of strategies to increase the use of the complete street model. In line with this legislation and as an initial

step towards achieving the mandate of this Bill, WSP will assist DPW in developing a Complete Streets policy and a pipeline of Complete Streets projects based on the analysis performed as a part of the Transportation Master Plan. WSP will be on the island next week to have our project kickoff.

Spirit of 1733

Investments in public transportation continue to be a central focus for the department. The 300-passenger, ADA-compliant Spirit of 1733 will be delivered next month, marking a significant milestone in our commitment to inter-island transportation. This ferry, the third of the department's fleet, will service route 32M between Cruz Bay, St. John, and Red Hook, St. Thomas. Designed specifically for the unique maritime conditions of the Virgin Islands, this vessel represents a significant step forward in improving commuter accessibility between the islands. The ferry, designed and fabricated by Gulf Craft, LLC in Franklin, Louisiana, is completed and will begin the required dock and sea trials and U.S. Coast Guard inspections next week.

Earlier this week, Jomo and I visited the shipyard to conduct one of the final owner's inspections before full completion. The ferry is scheduled to begin dock and sea trials next week and, barring any setbacks, will be in the territory and service by June 2025. As we are still in the procurement phase, I cannot disclose the ferry's operator. I want to recognize and thank Assistant Commissioner Rueben Jennings, Deputy Commissioner Karole Ovesen-McGregor, Chief Procurement Officer Kizma Petersen, Mr. Jomo McClean, and their respective divisions for their hard work on this project. It took a lot of coordination and effort to bring this to fruition, and words cannot adequately express my sincere appreciation and gratitude.

St. Croix/St. Thomas Ferry

In keeping with the Department's mission of Transforming Connectivity, the department will use GARVEE bonds as the financial tool to fund the fabrication of a St. Croix – St. Thomas ferry. This addition will provide a crucial link between the districts while addressing inter-

island connectivity. The ferry will allow passengers to travel with their vehicles, which adds an additional convenience. The final design and cost estimates are expected to be completed within 30 days. I want to thank the 35th Legislature for approving this landmark legislation, paving the way for the territory's second GARVEE issuance later this year.

Bus Orders

The Department has a bus procurement contract with Model 1 Commercial Vehicles, Inc., for nine (9) medium-duty buses for both districts, scheduled to begin manufacturing this month. The buses are expected to be delivered within the next 18 months, will have 28 passenger seats and two designated wheelchair locations, and will meet ADA requirements for public transit. The department has plans to procure additional fixed-route buses to replace its aging fleet. Paratransit buses are also scheduled for procurement this fiscal year. It is important to highlight that this contract was the department's first utilizing a State Cooperative Purchasing Contract, a procurement method that allows eligible entities to use available funds to purchase from pre-approved industry partners across jurisdictions.

CHALLENGES

Heavy Rainfall

Heavy rainfall throughout 2024 has significantly impacted road and drainage systems throughout the territory. The territory typically receives 20 to 40 inches of rain annually, but the amount was much higher last year. It is estimated that we received 20 inches above the annual average, amounting to about 40 to 60 inches of rain, depending on the island and localized area. The department has been actively responding to these challenges by clearing downed trees, debris from guts, landslides, and mudslides and addressing damage to critical roadways, including Centerline Road on St. John, Bolongo Bay Road, Nick Friday Drive, Fortuna, and Solberg on St. Thomas, to name a few. However, that is not enough.

With no federal dollars currently designated, we will need the help of this body to fund repairs to other areas. We acknowledge the ongoing need for vegetation control along

roadways. While we have made some progress over the past few months, we have plenty more work to do in this area. Later this year, the department anticipates acquiring its own sidearm cutter to help with vegetation management in St. Croix. We have also been actively discussing leveraging our combined resources to tackle this challenge with the V.I. Water and Power Authority.

In the next 30 days, the department will publish our roadside contractor schedule for greater public visibility and awareness of the program. We also encourage the public to continue to use the department's website, dpw.vi.gov, to report areas of concern.

STAFFING UPDATE

Like much of the government, the department faces the challenge of staff attrition due to retirement, relocation, or other job opportunities. This problem has manifested in the Transportation, Operations, and Engineering Divisions. Over the past 12 months, DPW has lost 30 employees in these areas alone. Critical positions like mass transit operators, general maintenance workers, mechanics, engineers, and project managers remain unfilled, which poses problems in keeping our roadways actively maintained, buses on the road, and projects managed.

DPW has been brainstorming ways to fill these positions in conjunction with the Division of Personnel, the Office of the Governor, and other partners. Still, we recognize the challenges that specific job requirements and lower salaries pose. Even considering these challenges, I want to thank all our staff, particularly in these key areas, for all they do daily to keep the department's mission and mandates moving forward.

In January 2025, I appointed a new CIP Administrator, Ms. Cherise Penn, to lead our team of engineers working on Capital Improvement Projects throughout the territory. We continue to serve our GVI partners with their requests for engineering services and have procured several task orders for engineering services to address our current engineering shortfall.

CONCLUSION

As always, I want to close by first thanking the men and women who serve in the Department of Public Works. I cannot thank you enough for your commitment to serving our community. I recognize our job is often thankless, but I salute you for your work every day. To the public: Thank you for your patience, trust, and understanding. Dealing with closed roads, bridges, detours, and changed traffic patterns is frustrating. This frustration and pain represent progress. Progress that will lead to generations of growth.

The Department of Public Works remains dedicated to enhancing our residents' and visitors' quality of life by improving our roads, bridges, drainage systems, and public transportation. We recognize that challenges remain, but we will continue to make meaningful progress through collaboration with stakeholders and steadfast commitment to our mission. Despite the challenges mentioned above, it is vital to recognize the progress made territory-wide. Residents are seeing recovery dollars manifested in new neighborhood roads, temporary and permanent bridges, rehabilitated parks and facilities, improved cemeteries, and enhanced beautification. Federal collaboration is delivering growth in our ferry program in ways we could have never imagined possible and will lead to improved and affordable inter-island and inter-district travel. The foundational pieces of the department's multi-modal transportation plan and the comprehensive transportation plan are taking shape.

Thank you for your time and support. My team and I will remain and are happy to answer any questions you may have.