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Violet Blasts \$489,672 St. Thomas Grass-Cutting Contract as St. Croix Pays Just \$114,430

During Wednesday's hearing, Senator Kurt Violet challenged school maintenance officials over why St. Thomas schools with less acreage carry a \$489,672 grass-cutting contract, while St. Croix's newly bid contract stands at \$114,430.

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Lawn at the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School in St. Thomas.

A sharp disparity between school grass-cutting contracts on St. Thomas and St. Croix became a focal point of Wednesday's Committee on Education and Workforce Development hearing, as lawmakers questioned why a district with less acreage is carrying a contract nearly four times larger and whether the territory is getting fair value for work tied to already strained school

maintenance budgets.

The matter came to the fore Wednesday during a hearing of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, when Senator Kurt Vialet pressed officials from the Department of Education and the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance for the contract figures.

From BSCM Chief Financial Officer Charmaine Mayers, Sen. Vialet learned that the St. Croix grass-cutting contract is valued at \$114,430, while the St. Thomas contract totals \$489,672.

Vialet immediately raised concern over the gap, noting that even though St. Thomas schools have “substantially less acreage,” the contract there is far higher. “Central [High School] alone is more than all of the acreage of all the schools in St. Thomas combined,” he said.

Ms. Mayers explained that the St. Croix contract, now valued at \$114,430, was recently bid, while the previous contract there was \$364,200. On St. Thomas, by contrast, the \$489,672 figure reflects a renewal of the prior contract rather than a newly bid agreement.

“Last year, there was a lot going on, and we weren't able to send out anything. So we just decided to move forward and utilize the one-year renewal,” Ms. Mayers said. She added that no renewal option was available for St. Croix.

That explanation did not satisfy Vialet, who argued that the territory cannot afford inflated service costs. “You're dealing with a cash-strapped entity that needs to have access to as much monies as possible,” he said.

He also pointed out that several schools on St. Thomas have very little grass on their compounds, making the cost harder for him to understand.

Craig Benjamin, BSCM's executive director, responded that lawmakers had to “gotta keep in mind the terrain.” Senator Vialet rejected that as sufficient justification and pressed for specifics. “What school are you speaking about that is so expensive that has this terrain that it needs to be such an exorbitant price?” he asked.

Mr. Benjamin said that on St. Thomas, contractors “use individuals with a weed eater to go through each of those campuses and with a machete to clear the fence and do the weeding.” He said the difference comes down to “manpower versus machine,” which in turn produces different costs.

Still unconvinced, Vialet requested documentation showing the difference in acreage between the two districts so he could better understand the disparity. “As long as we have these exorbitant contracts, we will never have enough money to maintain the schools,” he said.

He also recalled that in previous decades, in-house maintenance workers handled grass-cutting on school grounds, and that the cost of doing so did not approach nearly half a million dollars, the current value of the St. Thomas contract.

While Sen. Vialet maintained that the St. Thomas price is too high, the Department of Education offered a different concern: the lower St. Croix contract may be too low to produce quality work.

According to Superintendent Carla Bastien-Knight, the district is worried about the “quality we're going to get with these reduced costs for our acreage at our schools.” She said certain schools have “a lot of land,” and expressed disbelief that “\$114,000 covers this entire district.”

“Somebody charging \$600 to cut Alfredo Andrews school should raise concern of the quality of work you're going to get for \$600,” she told Senator Vialet.

Based on what he said he has observed, less and less grass is being cut each time. “I guess that's why it's so cheap. Nobody is really making them cut what they're supposed to cut,” he suggested.

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