

What is going on with the SPRUNG STRUCTURE at GUY H. BENJAMIN SCHOOL?

– FUTURE COMMUNITY FACILITY?

When construction activity began on the Sprung Structure at the site of the former Guy H. Benjamin school in 2018, the people of Coral Bay St. John were elated to see that FEMA and the VI Government were working to provide a new structure as a community center for all kinds of gatherings – to substitute for the four public gathering places demolished by Irma and Maria – that we all knew would take years to rebuild.

The Sprung Structure, for those who don't know, is a particular company's response to FEMA's willingness to build a facility that can be ready for use quickly and then used for several years to serve multiple purposes until new facilities are planned and constructed. We were very grateful to be a community chosen for this service.

The structure has seating and tables for 80 people, can legally accommodate 198 people, a kitchen to serve food, air conditioning, and internet communication as its basics.



Sprung Structure surrounded by Guy H. Benjamin School debris.



The empty “ready” interior:

What a wonderful facility to get the community programs running again!

People anticipated the VI government opening this Coral Bay facility in 2019 to replace the meeting rooms lost in the hurricanes. The St. John Boys and Girls club was planning for children’s afterschool programs, the Coral Bay Community Council (CBCC), government agencies, and other groups were anticipating evening meetings, townhalls and adult learning programs and distance education, and morning exercise and craft groups were looking forward to restarting there.

But we quickly realized, when construction was completed, that no provisions were made to fence the facility off from the debris of the 6 heavily hurricane-damaged school buildings, or for parking, and the public entrance was at a blind spot on the main road with no sidewalk, making it unsafe for children and pedestrians. When the elementary school was in operation, the school buses and children used the parking lot on adjacent land belonging to the Port Authority behind the Coral Bay fire station for safe access through a gate that led directly to the old playground, now the site of the Sprung Structure.

In July 2019, representatives of the Coral Bay Community Council (CBCC), the St. John Community Foundation, St. John Boys and Girls Club, and other interested parties met with the Commissioner of Education and her top staff to discuss the best ways to get the building operational as quickly as possible. CBCC offered donated funds to assist in making the site safe (fencing, night lighting, etc.), and CBCC staff time to schedule use of the building 7 days a week by a variety of groups and organizations, and whatever other assistance was needed, as the CBCC office is directly across the street. CBCC also offered to fund planning activities for the future reuse of the whole site from a federal grant received for this purpose, regardless of who would use and run it.

During this meeting, the Dept. of Education (VIDE) pointed out that it would be necessary to have a contractor hired to run the wastewater treatment system for an annual cost of about \$50,000 and this was a barrier to quick movement, and that they would think about the offer of community assistance to get the facility open.

Later in Fall 2019, after a meeting with the Governor, he requested that CBCC articulate the scope of work to open the space and operate it – through filing a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which was done. Other organizations also submitted requests and draft MOU's with their ideas and willingness to get the Coral Bay Sprung Structure open and in use.

Then COVID happened and with the New Schools project and providing education during COVID, it's understandable that VIDE had much more important priorities to manage. The \$50K cost to operate the waste treatment facility at GBS and other operating expenses did not appear as a line item in the 2020 or 2021 VIDE budgets approved by the Legislature, and the new Sprung Structure has stood unused.

As COVID restrictions are lifted, it is important that the people of Coral Bay have a facility to re-establish community activities – through children's afterschool programs, religious and social gatherings, hobby and yoga/exercise interest groups, and formal and informal adult education programs.

Our latest understanding is that VIDE intends to continue control and management of the Sprung Structure. Therefore, we would like to be sure this facility is fully included in the upcoming Governor's budget and the Legislature budget discussions for FY 2022.

The cost of preparing this facility upfront for safe use is estimated to be between \$50,000 and \$100,000 for fencing and safe access. Operating the facility will require continuous facility costs: the \$50K for the wastewater plant operation, plus electric, HVAC, internet, cleaning, & repairs. It will also require use scheduling and unlocking/securing the facility on a seven-day-a-week basis to fully maximize its availability to meet local needs. These total operating costs, depending on how they are accomplished, could cost between \$125,000 and \$250,000 a year. Ideally some of this cost could be recovered in user fees. This sounds expensive if the building is only used for one purpose a few days a week, but if it is used for many purposes – the average cost per hour of use would be reduced dramatically.

As we emerge from COVID isolation, people all over the Virgin Islands will be looking for new ways to reconnect with their communities. In Coral Bay, opening the Sprung Structure --as a gathering and group activity space, for learning and recreation and socializing for students and adults alike-- will provide us all with the boost forward we need, after COVID isolation.

Therefore, in May 2021, CBCC has written a letter to the Governor and the Senate president to request that these expenses be added to the VIDE's FY 2022 budget, so the facility can open and be available to all these different groups of people and to government agencies for meetings with residents. Even better would be a supplemental appropriation in FY 2021 to get the building up and open now!

What are our next steps to get this facility open? Stay tuned and express your own opinions of how to go forward. This document will be updated and expanded, as interest grows.