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Bill Requiring WAPA to Suspend Disconnection of Service Until June 30 to be Heard at Senate Session Today

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WAPA's plant on St. Croix By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

A bill requiring that the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority suspend the disconnection of service to residents until June 1, 2020, or until the state of emergency recently declared by Governor Albert Bryan is lifted, will be heard during today's session at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall, where the main item on the agenda will be [a bill giving the governor authority](#) to pursue loans amounting to \$60 million through revenue anticipation notes — generally short-term loans repaid within a year — in a bid to keep the government of the Virgin Islands afloat.

The bill to suspend disconnection is sponsored by Senators Alicia Barnes and Donna Frett-Gregory, two lawmakers who have voiced concern of WAPA during their tenure. Recently, Ms.

Barnes [called on the WAPA board to suspend](#) the authority's disconnection policy. "This is a matter of saving lives," she said. "Nationally we already are aware of over 20 states that have taken some type of action to suspend disconnections. We must adopt this same mindset in the Virgin Islands."

[Across the U.S. mainland](#), utility companies are suspending disconnection policies and allowing customers — even if they can't pay their power bill — to keep the lights on. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, [Viya has done the same](#). The move comes amid deepening economic crisis on the U.S. mainland and in U.S. territories caused by the virulent coronavirus, which has killed more than 24,000 people and infected over 537,000, according to John Hopkins University. On Thursday, 3.28 million Americans filed unemployment claims.

Earlier this month, when WAPA announced that it would start issuing 60-day bills to customers, Ms. Frett-Gregory railed against the utility. "It is clear that WAPA don't have any regards for the customers here in these Virgin Islands. The Legislature has met with them several times and we have yet to get a straight answer from WAPA."

She added, "They can't bill people sixty days all at once for their incompetence. I want to make that clear. This AMI system that they purchased, they need to come back to the vendor and address that issue. WAPA is out of control. I'm so upset this afternoon. All they're going to be doing is creating anxiety for the consumers here in the Virgin Islands. Elderly people who are going to be impacted by this. We have people who are on fixed incomes. They cannot make an arbitrary decision like this absent of consulting the community. They just can't do it. Because of their incompetence? I'm so upset."

Now the senators are no longer calling on WAPA to take action, they are taking action themselves, through legislation, to force the authority's hand.

The measure is expected to gain support among lawmakers. And if it is vetoed by Governor Albert Bryan — who has highlighted on multiple occasions WAPA's dire need for funding — then senators could override the governor's veto if support in the Senate for the measure is unified.

Other action during today's session will include:

Consideration of Nominees

Nominees

- Judge Denise M. Francois: Judge, Superior Court of the Virgin Islands
- Mr. Celestino A. White, Sr.: Virgin Islands Port Authority Governing Board District of St. Thomas/St. John
- Mr. Willard John: Virgin Islands Port Authority Governing Board District of St. Croix
- Dr. Jerry Smith, PT: V.I. Government Hospitals and Health Facilities Corporation Virgin Islands Board of Physical Therapy District of St. Thomas/St. John

Bill No. 33-0288

A Resolution to Congress to include the Virgin Islands in COVID-19 stimulus packages.
(Sponsored by: Senators Alicia Barnes, Oakland Benta, Marvin A. Blyden, Allison L. DeGazon, Dwayne DeGraff, Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Donna Frett-Gregory, Kenneth L. Gittens, Stedmann Hodge, Myron D. Jackson, Javan E. James, Sr., Steven D. Payne, Sr., Janelle K. Sarauw, Athneil Thomas, Kurt Violet)

Consideration of Bills

Bill No. 33-0287

An act authorizing the Governor to borrow monies from public funds of the Virgin Islands to offset cash flow problems caused by shortfalls resulting from the COVID-19 Virus Pandemic in the collection of revenues, and to create working capital, avoid layoffs of Government employees, pay essential obligations and meet the operating expenses of the Government for Fiscal Year 2020. (Sponsored by: Senators Donna Frett-Gregory, Kurt Violet, Janelle K. Sarauw, Alicia Barnes, Athneil Thomas, Dwayne M. DeGraff, Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Allison DeGazon, Marvin Blyden, Kenneth L. Gittens, Stedmann Hodge, Myron Jackson, Javan E. James, Oakland Benta, Steven D. Payne)

Bill No. 33-0289

An Act amending title 27, chapter 1 of the Virgin Islands Code relating to the Board of Medical Examiners by including Doctors of Podiatric Medicine as physicians allowed to supervise physician assistants in their respective practice (Sponsored by: Senator Kurt A. Violet)

Bill No. 33-0290

An Act amending title 30, Virgin Islands Code, chapter 5, subchapter V, section 127 by reducing the amount of time that the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority can back-bill customers, and by defining the “billing cycle” (Sponsored by: Novelle E. Francis, Jr.)