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A Utility In Crisis: WAPA Officials, PSC To Appear Before Senate Oct. 1

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WAPA Pole By. VI Consortium

The top officials of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority have been subpoenaed to appear before the Legislature to answer a host of questions about fiscal mismanagement and the near-daily electrical outages plaguing the territory.

Senator Kenneth Gittens announced via Facebook Tuesday that V.I. Water and Power Authority executives, WAPA governing board members and members of the Public Services Commission have been ordered to appear before the Virgin Islands Legislature at 10 a.m. on October 1.

“The Senate President (Novelle E. Francis) has given a definite date so that we can query the Board and the Commission members,” Mr. Gittens said. “We have seen a downward spiral in efficiency. The St. Thomas-St. John District is experiencing what appears to be rolling blackouts that are affecting our economy and residents. We expect to get some answers and allow the community to have a say.”

An Entity in Crisis

Also on Tuesday, the water and power authority all but acknowledged an internal crisis that it cannot manage itself.

WAPA Executive Director Lawrence Kupfer said “subject matter experts” from the New York Power Authority (NYPA) have been asked for technical assistance in resolving electrical system issues that have led to power outages nearly everyday in parts or all of St. Thomas, St. John and Water Island.

“It is no secret that both of WAPA’s power plants, but more so, the Randolph Harley Power Plant on St. Thomas, has suffered through instability events of late,” Mr. Kupfer said.

In other words, the organization is failing at its core responsibility: keeping the lights on and clean water flowing. “My team and I conferred with our colleagues at the NYPA and formally requested assistance in identifying the root causes of these outages,” he said.

The V.I. Alliance for Consumer Justice seeks answers, too. Co-founder Clarence Payne said that despite WAPA’s aging, inefficient and storm-damaged assets, he is not convinced the rolling blackouts on St. Thomas and St. John are purely technical problems. “We were threatened with rolling blackouts,” Mr. Payne said. “We were warned that blackouts would happen unless they got the rate increases they wanted.”

Last month the Alliance for Consumer Justice gathered more than 1,300 signatures of ratepayers opposed to a 3-cent per-kilowatt-hour increase in the base rate paid by residential and business customers. Dozens of people turned out for a Public Services Commission hearing in August to protest the rate hike request. The PSC postponed a vote on the WAPA request.

“What we have is clearly not working,” Mr. Gittens said. “It (WAPA) is killing our economy and really hurting our residents.”

And WAPA’s money management may be worse. The Consortium reported [exclusively last week](#) that WAPA has retained stateside insurance experts and lawyers to help re-evaluate the cost of damages insured assets during Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

WAPA's in-house estimate pegged damages at a mere \$3.5 million. Because of the low amount of estimated damages, WAPA never sought to recover a penny from its insurance carrier, Lloyd's of London, after the catastrophic 2017 storms.

Insurance adjusters retained last week to review the estimate said insured losses are likely closer to \$20 million or more.

Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. said Tuesday that he shares the frustration over WAPA's inability to keep the power on in the St. Thomas-St. John District.

"We fully understand how the disruptions have impacted homes, workplaces, schools and particularly our residents with sensitive health concerns. We are tirelessly working with WAPA towards establishing more reliable and efficient power generation and have been assured that the immediate challenges confronting the authority are solvable," the governor said.

The assurances are not enough for the Alliance for Consumer Justice and its members. "I am perplexed. They are supposed to be the experts. We have done everything they have asked us to do. Every month, we pay the highest (electric) rates, and what do we get? They can't keep the lights on."