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Senator Barnes Slams WAPA's Disorganization at Public Meeting, Says Base Rate Increase Proposal 'Disingenuous'

WAPA / **Published On December 06, 2019 07:02 AM /**

Staff Consortium **December 06, 2019**

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Senator Alicia Barnes By. The Virgin Islands Legislature

The Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority held its third of three territory-wide public meetings at the Cardiac Center conference room on St. Croix Thursday evening, with the plan of outlining to the public its updated Integrated Resource Plan, which makes plain the authority's strategy for generation to meet projected future power demand.

The meeting was held to solicit public comment, but WAPA came under fire from Senator Alicia Barnes, the sole lawmaker to attend the public meeting on St. Croix, for what Ms. Barnes said was WAPA's lack of preparedness for its own meeting. She chided the authority for not having in

place tools to properly document the meeting -- including the very public comments the utility said it was soliciting.

"WAPA did not have a stenographer present nor did they record the proceedings of the meeting," said Ms. Barnes to the Consortium. The senator sat in the first row during the meeting. "In fact there was no mechanism in place to capture the public comments provided. Tonight was more like a check-the-box opportunity for WAPA to say that the public was given a chance to comment on their updated IRP, without the utility genuinely attempting to do so."

"It was somewhat of a farce and yet another missed opportunity by WAPA, as they failed to explain and demonstrate how the updated plan would result in affordable and reliable power. No hard numbers were presented as to the IRP's impact on lowering rates and improving reliability," said the senator.

A WAPA conversation these days is not complete without a discussion about the utility's upcoming base rate increase, which WAPA vows will not affect customers. Ms. Barnes told this publication that WAPA's strategy of coupling the base rate increase with the removal of certain surcharges, as well as the current LEAC, to result in a so-called no net increase "is disingenuous and a strategy I cannot support."

"The LEAC is a variable cost that fluctuates with global market pricing. We are all aware of the anxiety and stress the situation with WAPA has inflicted and continue to inflict on our constituents and ourselves," Ms. Barnes said. "For some time, I have been working on legislation to begin to correct some of the systemic deficiencies that exists in the authority. After the hearing on October 1, pursuant to current law, I requested from the authority its financial statements and I submitted draft legislation and amendments to begin to address the issue."

The measures, Bill No. 33-0210 and Bill No. 33-0211 were assigned to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary in October, Ms. Barnes said. She added that as recently as Wednesday, "I once again requested that these bills be placed on the Dec. 12 Rules and Judiciary agenda."

WAPA has been pushing for its base rate increase for the better part of 2019. The authority is seeking an increase of 5.8 cents per kilowatt-hour in the permanent base utility rate, coupled with an "immediate offset" of 3.08 cents when the so-called Leased Generator surcharge paid by WAPA's customers each month expires, WAPA contends.

Governor Albert Bryan, meanwhile, [has wholeheartedly supported WAPA's efforts](#), and has even urged the Public Services Commission in a recent letter to grant WAPA the increase. The Consortium obtained a copy of the letter, which the publication published, leading to mass public outcry. Mr. Bryan [subsequently altered his stance](#), and said that he has since urged Water and Power Authority Executive Director Lawrence Kupfer to pen a letter to the PSC that requests the rate change be reduced from a "minimal impact" on rate-payers to "zero" increase on the overall rates paid by homeowners and businesses.

"We have been listening to people," Mr. Bryan said Monday during his weekly press briefing. "We understand that there is a lot of confusion in the public about what is going on. We understand why people would be frustrated about further pressures in the economy, considering our housing situation now (and) inflation rising the way it is."