

Liberty VI Blames Public Works For Fiber Cable Project Delays Putting \$85 Million in Federal Funding at Risk

Tangled in Red Tape: Liberty VI's Struggle with DPW Over Fiber Installation

Technology / **Published On January 29, 2024 06:08 AM /**

Nelcia Charlemagne **January 29, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



In addition to the rocky [migration process](#) that has angered and frustrated many former AT&T customers, Liberty VI's undergrounding project for fiber cables has also encountered major challenges, placing almost \$85 million in federal funding in jeopardy.

Through the Connect USVI program, Liberty was awarded partial funding to help it run underground fiber cables, a more resilient standard against natural disasters than the traditional pole-mounted cabling system common in the region. However, with the project teetering dangerously close to missing key deadlines, that funding could be rescinded – leaving the territory in uncertain territory when it comes to its modernization agenda in the telecommunications

sector.

During last week's meeting of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, Liberty Country Manager Ravindra Maywahlall told lawmakers that the Department of Public Works was the primary stumbling block.

"Permitting delays have not allowed us to build at the speed required to ensure we complete our milestones on time," said Mr. Maywahlall, referring to the requirement to achieve at least 40 percent completion by the end of 2024, which translates into connecting 18,400 homes to fiber broadband. According to Mr. Maywahlall, 72 permit packages, covering over 19,000 homes, have been submitted to DPW. However to date, the agency has only "approved 18 permit packages that amount to approximately 4,000 home passes," Mr. Maywahlall contended.

"If the network isn't built in the appropriate timelines, as well as meeting the criteria for those respective milestones, that grant will be in danger," Mr. Maywahlall told Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger, who wondered whether the prolonged permitting process was posing a risk. "It's a pity because it was meant to develop the infrastructure for all Virgin Islanders," he bemoaned.

Though invited to Wednesday's meeting, DPW instead chose to submit testimony via a letter, which stood in stark contrast to the framing of the matter by the Liberty official.

To complete the undergrounding of fiber cables, Liberty VI intends to use a process called micro trenching, cutting trenches that are roughly 3 inches across. The company's intention is to bury their lines at depths between 8 and 12 inches. However, DPW policy for undergrounding efforts requires trenching "at least 24 inches or below the surface," according to the agency's letter. Liberty also noted that "most if not all states do not allow micro trenching on highways." Liberty later clarified that "highways" refer to those that are federally funded and noted that it only intends to perform the microtrenching on main roads.

The letter from DPW also told committee members that "there seems to be a disconnect between the project development team and the boots on the ground," as "there have been instances where crews have done work in unapproved areas." Public Works cited a "lack of utility coordination" resulting in damage to other public infrastructure. Further, DPW called for Liberty VI to address deficiencies in work already performed, including "loose and faulty vault covers," the filling of trenches after the fiber has been laid, and "inadequate stripping."

The preservation of the territory's roadways are of prime importance to DPW throughout the trenching process, and as such, "all permits are reviewed and scrutinized through this lens," the agency wrote.

Reservations and concerns outlined by Public Works "raise[d] so many concerns" for several lawmakers including Senator Marise James, that she expressed disappointment with the absence of any DPW representative to respond to questions and provide explanations. This left the telecommunications company to plead its case unopposed.

For its part, Liberty VI argued throughout that the blame for the sluggish pace of the fiber rollout was with DPW. In some instances, officials complained that they had been awaiting approval for up to 9 months. Regarding debates over where the micro trenching is permitted, Jose Arias, Liberty's construction director, told lawmakers that "so far, we have done our trenching wherever DPW has allowed us." He asserted that DPW "never explained to us any difference" regarding micro trenching on locally funded roads vis-à-vis federally funded roads.

Meanwhile, Mr. Maywahlall confirmed that 80 percent of micro trenching efforts are slated for local roads.

Nonetheless, Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean Pierre Oriol explained to legislators that “there's no way we can get to 33,000 locations without crossing between local and federal highway routes.” He speculated that it would be a “complicated issue.”

Sensing an “impasse,” committee chair Senator Marvin Blyden promised to call the relevant stakeholders into a meeting. Concerned over the possible loss of crucial funding, he noted that “there should be no excuses moving forward.”

© Viconsortium 2024