

WAPA Urged by Board Chair to Develop Independent Energy Sources for Each Home

WAPA Chair, Kyle Fleming, advocates for a shift towards self-sustained energy systems in homes, aiming to enhance reliability and autonomy in the Virgin Islands' power supply

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In the wake of recent struggles to maintain a steady power supply across the territory, the chair of the V.I. Water and Power Authority's Governing Board has called on the utility to actively explore a "distributed, decentralized approach" to power.?

Kyle Fleming, chair of WAPA's board and the Director of the Virgin Islands Energy Office, apologized during last week's board meeting for the "shameless plug," but nevertheless raised the issue of having a much larger scale rollout of sustainable energy initiatives such as residential battery storage. He referenced a Vermont-based company that was facing similar challenges to

WAPA - “very remote customers in their service territory, that struggle from being able to have centralized electricity delivered to the far reaches of the grid.” What Green Mountain Power has done, Mr. Fleming explained, is to “essentially deploy energy storage devices at the residential homes, which...improves the service that they’re able to deliver to those customers.”?

While he said that the Virgin Islands was “starting to scrape the surface” when it comes to sustainable energy solutions, Mr. Fleming argued that the thrust should not necessarily come from the Energy Office, but should be a utility-run strategy to take advantage of scale. “I feel like we’d be remiss if we’re not active in exploring the distributed, decentralized approach to still providing the same quality of service that our community demands.” VIEO’s efforts, he disclosed, may be able to reach approximately a hundred people, but with the territory’s energy utility behind a push for battery storage, thousands of households could be included. Consumers could utilize WAPA’s existing billing system to pay for their battery storage setups, Mr. Fleming offered.?

But, as a fellow board member put it, how does WAPA move from talking about the issue to ensuring that it is implemented, especially with the utility bogged down with overburdened staff and not enough cash to meet its needs?

?According to Mr. Fleming, WAPA would need to identify “champions” within the company to drive that idea forward. Without those key employees, important pathways forward “very easily become just ideas...that exist, but don’t actually get executed.”?

Board member Hubert Turnbull expanded on Mr. Fleming’s point, saying that overall, WAPA needed to provide “better behind the meter services.” Noting the territory’s rapidly aging population, he observed that the frequent outages and rationing such as what St. Thomas is currently experiencing takes a toll on the elderly. Energy storage solutions would be extremely helpful to that demographic, he noted, but said that the issue “was not only a WAPA problem to solve.” He argued that input was needed from partners including the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, as well as possibly the Department of Health. “It’s way beyond energy,” Mr. Turnbull said.