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Residents Share Their Thoughts on How WAPA Should Move Forward

Following frequent power outages, news of the resignation of CEO Andrew Smith, and WAPA's perennial financial issues, the Consortium sought the perspective of those most affected by the instability— local residents

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Night shot of WAPA's Richmond power plant. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Amidst ongoing instability at WAPA – the utility's perennial financial issues, frequent power outages, and news of the [imminent departure of CEO Andrew Smith](#) – the Consortium asked those who are most affected by the crisis, everyday Virgin Islanders, about their experience with the utility and what they believe would be needed to remedy the situation.?

“We need to get rid of WAPA itself and make it private because whatever they have been doing for the last 10 years since I moved back here is a waste of time and waste of money,” Andy McCarthy told Consortium journalists. For Mr. McCarthy, the instability is due to a lack of “fortitude” from WAPA and government officials to pursue alternative options. “One of the things they could do instead of buying all the propane is invest that money in, put it in, solar panels in everybody's houses that will eliminate a lot of that stuff—feedback into the grid—that's one of the reasons,” McCarthy proposed. Despite using solar power himself, McCarthy nevertheless expressed frustration towards WAPA’s high electrical bills—which he attributes to their “old” and “inefficient” equipment—because he said the average Virgin Islander cannot afford solar panels in their homes.

Ernesta Taylor, a local lawyer, also uses solar panels in her home but felt particularly close to the crisis because of her mother’s high electrical bills. “My mother—she’s bed-ridden—she gets a bill for \$2,000. Every other month it was \$67. I have to take time from my job to go to WAPA to be given the runaround,” Ms. Taylor said. “Nobody responds to email —cby the way I’m an attorney — they don’t respond to my emails, they don’t respond to my phone calls, they just don’t care and we’re victims of an agency that doesn’t care.”

Because of her distrust of local leadership, Taylor said an outside investigation is needed to stabilize the current crisis as well as to find solutions to long-term issues. “I don’t think we can do it on our own. We’re not able to do it on our own. We tried everything else and it's not working,” Taylor said. Earlier this year, the Office of the Inspector General began an [audit of WAPA](#) aimed at investigating a host of unresolved issues including those related to the the electronic metering system, the shipment of WAPA equipment to the British Virgin Islands, and the loss of over \$2 million dollars to an offshore account.

Another resident who preferred not to disclose their name echoed the sentiment, saying that new leadership with a new approach is needed for WAPA because “what's happening right now isn’t working.” “I just think it needs new leadership with [a] more direct, a more forward way of thinking, to see what’s working elsewhere as opposed to here,” the concerned citizen mused.?

For Anderson, who did not wish to disclose his last name, the situation affects him and other Virgin Islanders who use WAPA the most, yet many remain hopeless with no idea of how the utility should move forward. “I have no idea, I wish I had an idea because I really really want to fix it because the bulk of the burden is on the customer, so I just pray to God so they will release that burden on our back,” he told Consortium journalists.

At least one St. Croix resident, however, is satisfied with the service provided by WAPA. Elroy Swanson noted that he doesn’t personally have an issue because he relies on the Juan F. Luis Hospital feeder and therefore experiences few power outages. “I don’t have no complaints. I don’t really have any objections; it's business so,” Mr. Swanson said.

Despite his contentment, the sentiment among residents of the Big Island was overwhelmingly negative. “I’m not sure what will fix it, but I know that the community deserves better,” said a woman who identified herself only as Taylor. She spoke directly to other Virgin Islanders who have been impacted by WAPA’s shortcomings as a utility: “for the folks that do care, I hope we can come together and find a solution. That’s my comment.”