

logo not found or type unknown

'Enough is Enough': Virgin Islanders Protest for Immediate WAPA Reform and Federal Oversight Amid Persistent Blackouts

Residents demand urgent action from officials, calling for transparency and a change in management at WAPA to address long-standing issues with the USVI's power supply during a highly visible protest in downtown Charlotte Amalie

Community Center / **Published On June 11, 2024 05:50 AM /**

Tsehai Alfred **June 11, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



St. Thomas residents speak to Senator Milton Potter on Monday, June 10 near the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Building in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. By. TSEHAI ALFRED, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Dozens of St. Thomas residents, frustrated with recent power outages as well as decades-long high utility bills and poor service, gathered in downtown Charlotte Amalie on Monday to protest current conditions under the Water and Power Authority. Protesters called for urgent action from elected officials during the [energy state of emergency](#) that was declared in late April.

The “Enough is Enough” protest organizers advised community members to wear black to symbolize both the ongoing rolling blackouts and what they claim is the lack of transparency from local leaders on the issue. After gathering at Emancipation Garden, the crowd walked to Government House before arriving across the street from the Legislature.

As the protesters chanted outside of the Legislature, receiving honks of support from cars driving by, three lawmakers— Senators Milton Potter, Ray Fonseca, and Marvin Blyden—walked across the street to engage in discussions with the residents.?

“WAPA has spent over a billion dollars in federal FEMA disaster recovery money since the hurricanes, one billion dollars, and we have the most unreliable power we’ve had in the last year...there is absolutely no evidence that the problem is money,” one resident—skeptical that the FEMA funding for the complete replacement of the Estate Richmond power plant, [announced by Governor Albert Bryan Jr.](#), will stabilize the situation—said to Mr. Potter. “I’m willing to bet you that’s what the turnaround company is going to say: fix the old power plant, fix the old way of doing it,” the resident added. Mr. Potter responded, “If it’s a credible turnaround company they can’t do that.”



Residents express frustrations over continued power instability and high costs, urging Governor Bryan to seek more robust solutions. (Credit: Tsehai Alfred, V.I. Consortium)

The hiring of a turnaround company — the V.I. Public Finance Authority recently [selected to be Ernst & Young](#) for the job — was [mandated](#) by the V.I. Legislature last year to stabilize the utility’s finances and operation. However, many residents expressed distrust over the choice, citing credibility and transparency concerns. One protester raised concerns about Ernst & Young’s previous relationship with WAPA influencing their consultancy. The resident asked Sen. Potter if he would “stand up and tell them no— the governor cannot keep doing the same thing with the same failed consultants.”

Mr. Potter encouraged the protestors to instead speak to Governor Bryan directly about the state of emergency, but the group said that they attempted to engage the administration when they were gathered outside of Government House, but officials only came out to move chairs. “There’s no political will to fix it, none, cause it’s a big black hole of corruption,” one protester said to Mr. Potter.

Jason Budsan, a St. Thomas resident who came out to protest and member of Solar for All, said that the focus of Government House’s weekly press briefings should change, so as to build more community confidence in the turnaround company and transparency. Mr. Budsan would like for the governor to report on what his administration did in the previous week, rather than speaking about the administration’s future plans. “If we are in a state of emergency, everyone should be acting like it is one,” Mr. Budsan said. His concerns over the utility’s instability are heightened due to the projected “above-normal” hurricane season. “We are an island unto ourselves, if we don’t fix that island it’s going to go down,” Budsan said.

During Monday’s press briefing, Governor Bryan acknowledged the protest and the frustrations of Virgin Islanders over their troubled power company. “I really appreciate the organizations that are coming out to protest WAPA. It just puts an exclamation mark on why we need to have a state of emergency,” he said.

Meanwhile, former Property & Procurement Commissioner Randolph Bennet used his time at the protest to raise awareness about his intended gubernatorial run in 2026. He also shared his grievances with WAPA as a St. Thomas resident who, like many, has lost appliances due to the utility’s power fluctuations. Like many in the territory, Mr. Bennet also does not own a generator or air conditioning unit. He described the turnaround company as a “bandaid to the solution,” saying instead, “WAPA needs to be out of here, we need to know where our money is going.” Echoing the sentiment of many others gathered in protest on Monday, Bennet advocated for a federal audit to be conducted to examine the utility’s operational and financial instability. The Office of the Inspector General, which [produced a bombshell report](#) in 2021 detailing the major mishandling of the Vitol propane conversion project, is currently engaged in another legally-mandated [special audit](#) of the utility.

Leah Trotman—a St. Thomas native who recently moved back to the island after receiving her graduate degrees—said given her background in climate research, she would like to see more data produced about resident’s experiences with WAPA, such as community surveys about appliance damage, as a step in stabilizing the crisis. According to Ms. Trotman, she has never experienced as many power outages from WAPA as she has since moving back home. The instability has damaged her family’s appliances, leading to considerable amounts of personal distress. “I know our story isn’t singular but it’s plural,” Ms. Trotman said about her family’s experience with WAPA.

Ms. Trotman told Consortium journalists that due to the WAPA state of emergency, as well as other issues in the territory, many of her family members had advised her not to move back, saying “it’s a lost cause.” “I refuse to believe that,” Trotman said in response.