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WAPA and PSC Boards Say Nothing Is Wrong With Current Structure; Senators Beg to Differ

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Aerial shot of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority's Richmond, St. Croix plant.
By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

Chairmen of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority and the Public Services Commission Boards on Thursday defended the boards' current structures in front lawmakers eager to change them. Two bills proposed by Senators Kenneth Gittens and Alicia Barnes call for board members to have backgrounds in requisite fields, while changing the number of members required for quorum. The measures were held in committee to make changes — including leaving the number of members at current levels — but senators, barring their reservations, were in favor of the bills and they were expected to move forward following amendments.

WAPA Board Chairman Anthony Thomas, who is also the commissioner of the Dept. of Property and Procurement, told senators he saw no reason why change was needed. "The Board does not support the intent of the Bill, because in the Board's opinion, it is attempting to fix a problem that does not exist and reduces the Governor's Administration's ability within the Authority to set policy objectives. Consequently, the Governing Board recommends the Amendments should not be considered," said Mr. Thomas.

Mr. Thomas's comments drew blowback from lawmakers.

Senator Kurt Violet, who said the language in the measure relative to qualifications for board members needed to be strengthened for specificity, said while board testifiers argued that the current boards included qualified individuals, "the ratepayers are not seeing that."

"The board is the entity that approved the Vitol contract," Mr. Violet said. The Vitol contract has been deemed one of the worst to be signed by a government entity in the territory's history. The contract had an initial budget of \$87 million, but it ballooned to well past \$150 million with the cost being footed — to this day and for years to come — by taxpayers. Furthermore, WAPA promised ratepayers 30 percent in electric bill savings upon completion of the project, but savings were not realized.

"The agreement had to go through the WAPA board, and the board along with WAPA refused to give the PSC information. So we have issues," Mr. Violet said. The St. Croix senator is the sponsor [of a similar bill](#) that calls for qualified members to be part of the Government Employees' Retirement System board.

"The board is a direct result as to why WAPA has the issues it has now," Mr. Violet added. "The Vitol contract is the noose around the government's neck. One of the worst contracts ever negotiated by any entity of the government of the Virgin Islands."

Mr. Gittens expressed frustration with the chairmen's testimonies.

"Given the serious ongoing crisis we have here with our energy in this territory, I really feel like you all have some nerve to come here with such testimony today, as if everything is all well and fine," Mr. Gittens said. In a release issued Tuesday afternoon, the senator said, "We are going back to basics and ensuring that the membership of the WAPA board and the Public Services Commission are duly qualified. I don't doubt the good intentions of those who avail themselves to serve, but in the best interest of the community, it is critical that we have those who are fully prepared to make the difficult decisions necessary."

The bills are [here](#) and [here](#).