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Telecom Providers Point Fingers at WAPA for Network Shortfall Following Hurricane Ernesto; WAPA No-Show Angers Lawmakers

Karl Knight's absence from a crucial Senate hearing on telecommunications preparedness raises concerns as WAPA's readiness for the hurricane season remains in question

Hurricane Season / **Published On August 29, 2024 06:10 AM /**

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The absence of Karl Knight, the Water and Power Authority's new executive director, from a meeting of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications raised the ire of committee chair Senator Marvin Blyden.

Mr. Knight was among a pool of testifiers invited to provide a telecommunications update before the committee, including plans to stabilize service during the hurricane season. "When it comes to

telecommunications, vegetation management is critical, and that is one of the main reasons why we had the new CEO for WAPA on the agenda,” said Mr. Blyden. He told his colleagues that his office received correspondence informing him of Mr. Knight’s planned absence at “1:24 p.m”. According to the official agenda, the telecommunications update was scheduled for 1:30 p.m..

According to Mr. Blyden, the correspondence included a 5-paragraph written testimony that did not “address the matters that this committee raised, particularly with a question of preparedness to ensure the continuation of telecommunication networks in the event of a natural disaster.” “Our people suffer for days to communicate with their families...they deserve answers,” asserted. For Senator Blyden, WAPA’s absence was “disrespectful and unacceptable.”

On Tuesday, WAPA appeared before the Public Services Commission where Mr. Knight admitted that tropical storm Ernesto [significantly reduced the utility’s readiness](#) to handle any potentially stronger storms later on in what is predicted to be a highly active season. “I think we went into Ernesto at a seven. We’re probably at a four now.” Mr. Blyden, aware of the PSC appearance, contended that appearing before the Legislature is “just as important.”

Nonetheless, the telecommunications providers present at Wednesday’s committee hearing were invited to explain whether they were confident in their ability to maintain service in the event of a major weather event. According to Jennifer Matarangas-King, Viya’s vice president of public relations and governmental affairs, “many customers maintained service throughout [Hurricane Ernesto].” However, Ms. Matarangas-King reported that “prolonged power outages impacted our backup power supplies,” resulting in some customers facing intermittent outages in their Viya service. “Due to the challenges with reliable power in the territory, Viya has made great strides in upgrading and reinforcing its power infrastructure,” she announced.?

Liberty VI, too, outlined their emergency preparedness plans, including testing “functions and operational capabilities.” “Our network operations center monitors the network 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to ensure a prompt response once the conditions allow it,” said Ravindra Maywahlall, Liberty VI’s country manager. The company has hardened physical infrastructure including “replacing rooftops, improving exterior drainage issues and sealing buildings’ exterior walls to remediate water ingress issues.” Like Viya, Liberty has invested in generators to ensure expedient network recovery after a disaster and has initiated “an agreement with a local fuel supplier to obtain additional fuel as needed for its generators.”

During his line of questioning, Senator Dwayne DeGraff raised questions about the financial impact of Hurricane Ernesto on the territory’s telecommunications providers but instead learned that WAPA’s regular failures are a bigger risk than intermittent tropical storms. “There are many days, even when the weather is fine, that we are relying on backup power and that can be very costly because we’re talking about generators and fuel,” shared Viya’s Matarangas-King. T-Mobile, too, said they’ve learned to “be prepared and have our own generators.”

Meanwhile, the Virgin Islands’s Next Generation Network’s CEO Stephan Adams says WAPA has nicked their fiber optic cables while clearing overgrown vegetation on poles. “That’s a very expensive proposition...tree trimming is a problem for us more than the storm itself.” In a previous block of testimony, the Department of Public Works explained that it is not authorized to clear vegetation above 5 feet on electric poles so as to not accidentally damage any WAPA infrastructure.

With no WAPA representatives present during Wednesday’s committee hearing, the concerns of the telecommunications providers could not be adequately addressed. However, these providers expressed their commitment to continue hardening their network infrastructures and backup power

supplies to maintain the services that Virgin Islanders pay for.

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