

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sen. Francis Says 'WAPA's 60-Day Bill Cycle is Unconscionable,' Proposes Legislation Limiting Cycle to 35 Days

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WAPA's power plant on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

Senator Novelle Francis in a release issued Friday called on the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority to reconsider its decision to issue a 60-day billing cycle beginning in March. Mr. Francis, who is the president of the 33rd Legislature, said the move toward a 60-day bill cycle unfairly places the responsibility for WAPA's poor management and billing processes on the utility's customers.

The senator added that the extended bill cycle will be difficult for residents to absorb. "Our ratepayers already struggle with the high costs of electricity. Over the past year, the Legislature has appropriated approximately \$36 million in supplemental funding that was intended for WAPA to meet its financial obligations to VITOL and other vendors without passing these costs on to the Virgin Islands community. In my opinion, WAPA has reneged on its commitment to its customers and that is unconscionable," Mr. Francis said.

The St. Croix lawmaker said he has filed legislation that would define the utility's billing cycle as a period not to exceed 35 days. "I believe having a defined billing period would not only force the utility towards greater accountability, but also offer stability to our ratepayers."

Mr. Francis is also the author of an amendment that would limit WAPA's ability to back bill more than one billing cycle. He expects to offer both amendments at the Legislative Session scheduled for March 18, 2020.

Governor Albert Bryan on Friday told the Consortium that the move by WAPA was not a situation where the authority would be doubling the bills. "They are not double-billing and residents have four months to pay," the territory's leader said. "I too was alarmed and I called Mr. Kupfer and he clarified."

Mr. Bryan added, "They are correcting the billing system as we have asked them to and as a result the bills have to be issued to the current billing cycle. It would be unconscionable to ask residents to come up with all of it in one month."

In an interview with the Consortium Friday afternoon, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, who along with Senator Janelle Sarauw has been crafting legislation to rein in and improve the authority, spoke with exasperation about the announcement.

"It is clear that WAPA don't have any regards for the customers here in these Virgin Islands," Ms. Frett-Gregory said. "The Legislature has met with them several times and we have yet to get a straight answer from WAPA."

She added, "They can't bill people sixty days all at once for their incompetence. I want to make that clear. This AMI system that they purchased, they need to come back to the vendor and address that issue. WAPA is out of control. I'm so upset this afternoon. All they're going to be doing is creating anxiety for the consumers here in the Virgin Islands. Elderly people who are going to be impacted by this. We have people who are on fixed incomes. They cannot make an arbitrary decision like this absent of consulting the community. They just can't do it. Because of their incompetence? I'm so upset."

In its release, WAPA said that since the full amount of the 60-day bill will be due 20 days from the bill date, customers who are enrolled in Auto Pay are advised to visit the WAPA Customer Service offices to make the necessary adjustment to their automated payment if they wish to take advantage of what the authority is calling a three-month payment plan.