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Company's Proposal for Wind Energy Sites to Transform USVI's Power Landscape Wins Senate Approval

Senators approve \$160 million investment for microgrids on St. Thomas and St. Croix; projects expected to offset 23% of territory's fossil fuel use and create 150 jobs during construction phase

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Twelve years after first visiting the Virgin Islands on a mission to salvage the wind turbines at the Tutu Park Mall, Joel Hart is seeking legislative approval of two leases that would allow his company, Advance Power LCC, to develop two alternative energy sites for the territory's benefit.

That was the crux of the testimony offered by Mr. Hart to the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Monday. Before his written statement, Senator Novelle Francis

had asked his colleagues to support the microgrid projects on both St. Thomas and St. Croix as part of the “ongoing effort to create alternative and renewable energies to support our Water and Power Authority.”

Bill 35-0300 is a request to lease a total of 12.5 acres of land across several areas in Frenchman’s Bay Quarter in St. Thomas to construct a 16.5-megawatt grid at an annual cost of \$48,000. Bill 35-0320, meanwhile, is an act to approve some 29.8 U.S acres in Queen’s Quarter, St. Croix for a 33-megawatt grid, also at \$48,000 annually. Both properties will be used for constructing, operating, and maintaining wind turbine generators as part of a microgrid and other related purposes.

Approval of these leases, said Mr. Hart, is “a crucial element in helping to meet the long-term energy needs for the US Virgin Islands community.” Advance Power has already secured a [long-term power purchase agreement](#) with the Water and Power Authority and plans to sell power to WAPA at 11 cents per kilowatt hour, [authorized by the Public Services Commission](#) in March 2023. Leases for the properties were [executed earlier this year](#), and are now before the Senate as part of the approvals process. According to Mr. Hart, the two wind projects will supply “approximately 23% of the USVI total annual power consumption.” Additionally, he says the clean energy initiative is “expected to displace or reduce the territory’s current total fossil consumption by nearly 23.5%.”

Data collected from a four-year-long survey has informed Advance Power LLC of how much power it needs to produce to ensure it is consumed by WAPA as generated. By generating just enough to meet demand, it would eliminate the need for the wind turbine plant to include battery storage for the storage of excess power generation. Mr. Hart anticipates that once operationalized, the project will protect ratepayers from “fossil fuel price increases going forward,” as well as providing reductions in emissions.

The project is expected to be a \$160 million private investment into the U.S. Virgin Islands and will employ 150 people during the two year construction phase. Then, 10 to 12 full-time operational employees are expected to be hired at salaries that are “competitive for the industry. The projects will be included in Advance Power LLC’s growing portfolio of wind turbine projects nationwide.

The project, though in its beginning stages, has already received overwhelming support from lawmakers. “It will assist us and do us well in the long run,” observed Senator Marvin Blyden. Senator Ray Fonseca, meanwhile, described it as “awesome.” He did, however, share concerns about possible noise pollution associated with the project. For Mr. Hart, it was a non-issue. “If you and I were sitting at the base of the tower in the car, you couldn’t hear the blades,” he told Mr. Fonseca.

The site lease, for which Advance Power LLC sought approval on Monday, is “critical for us to move forward,” said Mr. Hart. Permitting, preliminary engineering, and geotechnical analysis are all required before construction can begin. “We couldn’t do the work on property that we don’t have a lease on,” he told Senator Samuel Carrion, who was interested in timeline targets.

Advance Power LLC has set aside 180 days to complete the permitting process after receiving a signed lease. However, Mr. Hart admitted that “my biggest concern is how long is it going to take to get the permit.” He appealed to the Legislature to offer support where possible. “How bad do you guys want this?” he asked.

When committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed concern that Advance Power LLC had not finalized its funding, Mr. Hart replied that the question being asked of him by lenders is when he will secure the site lease. “They're going to have conditions about us delivering a site lease before they start funding us.” Aware that the permitting process, too, cannot begin without a site lease, Frett-Gregory complained that “we are just way too bureaucratic here.”

“I'm hoping that we could really expedite and get all of this taken care of,” shared Sen. Francis, who had introduced the bills on behalf of Governor Albert Bryan.

Both bills received support from the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance, and will proceed to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting. Lawmakers have encouraged Advance Power LLC, a Texas company, to consider other sites across the territory that could lend themselves to wind energy production.

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