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PSC Questions WAPA's Intentions as 800+ Net Billing Applications Remain Stalled

PSC Commissioner David Hughes criticizes WAPA's delays, stating, "WAPA doesn't want this program in place. Never has. They've been stalling it out forever, so they can get the power for free," as 802 applications remain stalled in bureaucratic gridlock

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Members of the Public Services Commission learned that a myriad of delays have beset the net energy billing program, meant to encourage Virgin Islanders to adopt small scale solar power generation for homes and businesses.

The delays, mainly ascribed to staffing issues at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources as well as at the Water and Power Authority, mean that of the 802 applications

currently in the queue for the net billing program, none have received final approval.

“At this point, the Energy Office did not give an explanation for that,” said Jamil Springer, Industrial Engineer for the PSC. “There are about 410 applications awaiting final inspection” from WAPA, with the other half in various earlier stages of the process awaiting review by DPNR. He noted that the Energy Office director is meeting with WAPA's chief executive as well as DPNR's director of building permits, and the parties are “trying to expedite these issues.”

The V.I. Energy Office is exploring the use of grants to address the lack of staffing, Mr. Springer said.

It was important to note, said PSC Commissioner David Hughes, that even if the applications cleared the final approval hurdle, WAPA did not have functioning meters on hand to actually operationalize the net billing program in reality. “This program is dead in the water as soon as it gets to WAPA,” he argued. He inquired about the workarounds to this hurdle that were being developed by PSC staff.

“We are still refining those details,” said PSC Executive Director Sandra Setorie, noting that the matter had been discussed with WAPA and its board during a meeting months ago. “We're being very meticulous again because of the liability issues,” she said. “We want to make sure that all of the processes are absolutely flawless,” she responded, when asked to expand on what those liability issues were. They pertain to “individuals who may attempt to connect and not have the specific sanctions of the authority,” Ms. Setorie offered.

Commissioner Hughes wondered what stricture the PSC could insist on, other than what was already imposed by the electrical inspector for DPNR, who has ostensibly passed at least 400 of those systems which were checked against the National Electric Code. “We think there's some other liability in there that WAPA has some knowledge of that no one else does?” Mr. Hughes challenged.

It's not that the PSC believes that the inspections may not have been correctly carried out and certified, Ms. Setorie responded. However, “we've gotten other responses from WAPA,” she said, offering no further detail or clarity. “We really want to make sure that what we're doing is the right and correct thing to do; the process that we're using.”

Commissioner Hughes then reminded Ms. Setorie that he sat in a meeting with her and the Energy Office “at least five months ago now, whereby we established a workaround” for WAPA's lack of working meters. That workaround, he explained, hinged on the fact that “all of these customers that are waiting in line know how much power they're producing,” since their solar systems “have independent monitoring and metering capabilities.”

That means, according to Mr. Hughes, that these customers “know how much power they're sending to WAPA, and they can prove it.” The Public Service Commission, he said, could accept those records and “order a credit on the customer account with WAPA, until WAPA can catch up and get meters and put people in the billing system.”

While the PSC and WAPA drag their feet on implementing the workaround, the 802 solar systems currently in the pipeline “are installed whether they're inspected or not, and they're providing power to the utility for free whether they're inspected or not.” Commissioner Hughes argued that because the interminable bureaucracy has ground the permitting process to a halt, “a large percentage of people have just decided to ignore the process and they're moving on because they want solar power on the roof. That's not a good situation,” he noted. “The installers are ignoring

the permitting process, and everyone is ignoring WAPA.”

Commissioner Hughes argued that any liability issues would be magnified in this unregulated environment.

According to WAPA CEO Karl Knight, the utility does have the capacity to run the net billing program. “We have meters on the way,” he noted, telling commissioners that “within the next week or so, I’ll have 1100 meters” with more on the way. “Meters [is] not going to be a problem prohibiting us from doing this any further.” Mr. Knight pointed to the 400-odd applications “that are stuck in DNPR” as a larger issue that needed to be addressed. The bottleneck on the WAPA end will be dealt with in terms of staffing, he said. “I consider the net energy billing program our program,” Mr. Knight declared. “These are our customers. It’s a program that we are quite enthusiastic about being able to facilitate.”

Mr. Knight suggested to commissioners that WAPA be placed more in the driver’s seat when it comes to the administration of the program. “I’ve said basically [that] the program ought to be run from the Water and Power Authority,” he argued. “It shouldn’t be a permit coming from DPNR. The conversation really ought to start with WAPA...then you go seek your permit,” Mr. Knight continued, explaining that WAPA would be essentially pre-approving the system before the DPNR evaluates and permits the installation. “We do have certain inverters that we have a preference for because we feel that it meets our standards...and provides necessary protections to the grid,” Mr. Knight said. “We want to be able to inform customers of those requirements up front.”

Questioned by PSC Commissioner Laura Nichols-Samms, Mr. Knight estimated that it would take between 4 and 5 weeks to get the first batch of meters installed, but noted that further shipments were expected on the heels of the first set, and so installations would continue after the initial inventory was exhausted.

Commissioner Hughes initially welcomed the news and WAPA’s optimism that it could drive the program. However, during a connectivity issue that took Mr. Knight temporarily offline, Mr. Hughes expressed skepticism about WAPA’s purported enthusiasm. After learning that special two-way meters may be needed for net billing, Commissioner Nichols-Samms wondered how many of the 1100 incoming meters met that specification. “I’m sure he’s going to tell us that he’s got some on order,” declared Commissioner Hughes, before laying out an alternative perspective. “The fundamental problem with this whole topic is that WAPA doesn’t want this program in place. Never has. They’ve been stalling it out forever, so they can get the power for free.”

When Mr. Knight was reconnected, the question about meter compatibility was put to him directly. “I don’t believe we’re doing bi-direction with the new net billing program...but I do need to make sure what we have matches up with what we need,” he said, modulating somewhat from his previous confident assertion that WAPA was ready to move forward with the program. “My understanding is it’s a two meter setup,” Mr. Knight said when asked how WAPA would compensate for power being sent back to the grid. “I’ll confirm that for you, Commissioner Hughes, and make sure that we have the right inventory for those customers that are coming to the program.”

The WAPA CEO noted that there were customers already on the program. “I don’t want to give the impression to the public that we don’t have net billing customers currently connected,” Mr. Knight said.

Commissioner Nichols-Samns asked Mr. Knight to provide some details in writing. “We don't know how many of the meters actually have been ordered for that program. I think it's really important that we find out...so that we can actually make a statement” to the people in the queue, she suggested. Mr. Knight promised to provide her with the required information.

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