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Petronella Solar Farm Commissioned, Delivering Clean Power and Fuel Savings for WAPA

Located on the east end of St. Croix, the solar farm supplies WAPA with 10 megawatts of clean energy at peak production, delivering fuel savings and reducing reliance on traditional generators

Development / **Published On December 18, 2024 05:50 AM /**

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The Petronella Solar Farm on the East End of St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

In a triumphant moment for the Water and Power Authority, Tuesday marked the official ribbon cutting ceremony for the Petronella Solar Farm on the east end of St. Croix, which at peak production will provide WAPA with over 10 megawatts of energy at 10.9 cents per kilowatt.

“In recent years, we haven't had a lot of things at the Water and Power Authority to celebrate,” said CEO Karl Knight, expressing gratitude for the evolution in power generation the facility

represents.

“I want you to remember those days when we were running units 10 and 11, those boilers in the Richmond plant using that thick, dirty, bunker sea fuel oil, blowing that soot all over Kennedy and LBJ and Chabert,” he remarked to the audience, referring to several housing community in the vicinity of WAPA's Richmond power plant. Contrasting that with the power generated by the solar farm, Mr. Knight pointed out that “this is truly clean energy; no noise pollution, no air pollution, no water pollution.”

Mr. Knight recollected his first month on the job, during which WAPA was forced to implement rolling power outages due to low fuel supply and a delayed fuel barge. He noted that increased solar capacity means that WAPA is less reliant on external factors for electricity production. “It's always available. I don't have to wait for it to show up...If the sun rises tomorrow, Petronella will produce energy,” he remarked.



WAPA, Petronella, and GVI officials, including WAPA CEO Karl Knight (center), VI Electron owner Christian Loranger (left of Mr. Knight), and Governor Albert Bryan Jr. (center right) (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, V.I. Consortium)

The WAPA CEO also touted the increased reliability of solar production. “There are no mechanical parts to break,” he noted. “The only thing you need is a few dozen sheep,” he added. Some of the herbivore maintenance crew could indeed be seen on the grass behind the podium, seeking shade underneath solar panels as officials and dignitaries spoke in the foreground. Sheep are used in solar grazing to manage vegetation around solar panels, ensuring the panels remain clear.

Mr. Knight also addressed the main concern for electricity consumers in the territory - the cost savings provided by the commissioning of the solar facility. He noted that now, WAPA is able to take one of their traditional generators offline for at least part of the day. “That is quantifiable, verifiable fuel savings being delivered,” he noted.

Those savings, however, will not be passed on to consumers – at least not yet. During the most recent Public Services Commission meeting, the PSC [voted to keep the Levelized Energy Adjustment Clause rate steady](#) until at least the beginning of the second quarter of 2025. Governor Albert Bryan Jr. told the Consortium on Tuesday that it might take at least another year for consumers to begin seeing rate relief, since WAPA is still being subsidized by central government. In fact, as both WAPA officials and the governor have argued, the subsidy itself has been a form of rate relief, as WAPA has thus far been able to avoid raising costs to consumers in the current inflationary environment. Even so, the subsidy has either been paid using federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars, or local support. Now, the cost for a barrel of oil is between \$70-\$74, which is historically low.



Audience at Petronella's ribbon-cutting event on Tues. Dec. 17, 2024 (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, V.I. Consortium)

Mr. Knight was enthusiastic towards the progress WAPA has made in moving towards a more sustainable, secure energy future for the Virgin Islands. He thanked VI Electron owner Christian Loranger for successfully completing the “beautiful facility” despite the headwinds of government bureaucracy, as well as WAPA's internal red tape.

For his part, Mr. Loranger called the phenomenon of being able to capture energy from the sun “truly a miracle from God,” saying that it “still blows my mind every day that I'm here to have the batteries whirling powered completely by a free energy source.” He cited an economic theory that “the more energy a society uses, the higher the standard of living for that society,” implying that the boost in production from the solar plant could lead to exactly that outcome for the Virgin Islands. He thanked the Virgin Islands community for the trust reposed in him and his company to execute such a vital project for the territory, saying that he was “grateful and humbled” to be tasked with that responsibility.

Governor Bryan also alluded to the immense trust placed in the hands of VI Electron and Mr. Loranger, noting in his remarks that “cynicism in our community is at an all-time high, and that's not a local phenomenon.” The governor admitted that the “tremendous risk and tremendous trust” involved at times caused him to resort to calling on a higher power. “A lot of the times is was like, “Lord, please please come true.” His confidence began to grow as the project progressed,

especially with the sight of Mr. Loranger himself “in the dirt turning on the things and screwing in the stuff.”

“It wasn't people, he was out here himself,” Governor Bryan recollected. “Then I would see him weeks after in the airport, in full dirt at the airport waiting to get on a plane.” The governor lauded Mr. Loranger's commitment to successfully completing the project. “That's how we got to this point,” he noted.

Both Mr. Knight and Mr. Bryan vowed that the commissioning of the Petronella solar farm was only the beginning of the energy transformation in the territory. Not content with just providing a stable energy supply for consumers, Governor Bryan said that “it is our vision to be able to create...a Virgin Islands system that produces 12 cents industrial power in St. Croix, and to make us the leading place that people think about when they want to set up manufacturing in the Caribbean.”

Having a stable source of cheap industrial power would help transition the territory – and St. Croix in particular – from reliance on federal recovery dollars and provide a solid foundation to leverage the “full economic power of the South Shore, with two or three deep water ports, thousands of acres of industrial land, and aggressive companies that want to come here and use green energy to boost their future.”

Noting that WAPA was “still in a precarious situation,” and joking that “every day I ignore Karl's call when I see him on my cell phone,” Governor Bryan ended his remarks on an optimistic note. “Today is just a taste of what's to come.” Some day in the not-too-distant future, he assured Virgin Islanders, with cheap, consistent electricity, “WAPA is going to become a good cuss word in your house.”