

## St. Croix CZM Delays WAPA Undergrounding Projects Over Water Infiltration Concerns

**CZM commissioners question the reliability of underground power in flood-prone Christiansted and Frederiksted, requesting stronger data to address concerns. A third project in Catherine's Rest and Herman Hill was approved.**

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ST. CROIX — Expressing major concerns about potential water infiltration, the Coastal Zone Management Committee for St. Croix decided to place applications for two of the Water and Power Authority's electrical undergrounding projects on hold.

On Tuesday, WAPA was before the St. Croix CZM Committee with applications for federal consistency determinations for three projects which would move utility lines in Christiansted and

surrounding communities underground. Some of the work, said Peter Bonnes of FXB Engineering, WAPA's consultant, would be part of the infrastructure bundles being overseen by the territory's Super Project Management Office, while other portions of the work would be conducted via WAPA's regular procurement process.

The work will proceed in a phased approach, Mr. Bonnes said, and is scheduled to begin in the second quarter of the year. Queen Street, Hospital Street, Kings Cross Street, and East End Road will all be impacted by the work to relocate feeders underground. Other work will include Herman Hill road, and communities including Catherine's Rest, Humbug, and Smithfield in Frederiksted.

Mr. Bonnes said that a lot of thought has been put into "minimizing the overall impact of construction activities" on the community. One goal is to ensure that road surfaces are restored after each day of work, as much as possible, he noted, acknowledging that there have "been issues in the past" regarding pavement patching and roadway restoration. This time, "WAPA fully committed to ensure that all excavated trenches and manhole pits are properly restored on a temporary basis during construction, and of course on a permanent basis post construction," Mr. Bonnes said. One-way roads would be fully restored "from curb to curb," while two-way roads would have the lane(s) under which work was done restored, the consultant said, noting that the projects which were bundled would receive a second layer of quality assurance. The bundled projects would also fall under the Federal Emergency Management Agency's unified paving initiative, Mr. Bonnes noted, ensuring that roadway restoration after the undergrounding will be fully covered.

WAPA has also taken pains to ensure that proper communication with the community is built into the planning process. "Dust control measures, noise control...pollution control...public safety and ...anything that could impact the public," listed Mr. Bonnes, "these are in our drawings and our specifications."

Some of the electrical infrastructure will not be able to go underground, the consultant admitted. "When we're in these flood zones, we have to elevate," Mr. Bonnes noted. One such example is in the National Parks area of the Queen Street project, where three large pieces of electrical equipment must be elevated over four feet above grade. An elevated platform will be built in that location, the consultant said. Above-ground infrastructure will also be seen on the Smithfield project, Mr. Bonnes said, "because the water line is so high there." However, "this isn't going to happen very often," he assured.

CZM commissioner Kai Nielsen pressed Mr. Bonnes on the wisdom of pushing for a hybrid approach in Christiansted, utilizing both underground conduits as well as composite poles to run overhead lines. "I think the philosophy is that if we're in town – if we're in Frederiksted, if we're in Cruz Bay, if we're in Charlotte Amalie, and if we're in Christiansted – the preference is to underground as much as possible," Mr. Bonnes replied. "If we're outside those towns, especially if we're in residential communities, then the preference would be to go with underground, with overhead secondary...because it'll save cost, and it'll also eliminate the need to go on people's property and dig," the consultant continued.

Mr. Nielsen was not convinced of that approach, arguing that undergrounding power infrastructure in St. Croix's urban centers "knowing the water dynamics of Christiansted in particular," may not be the best idea. He rebuffed Mr. Bonnes's assertion that "underground all the way to the meter is going to be more reliable" by stating, "we're having direct feedback from the primary clients, which are the commercial clients in Christiansted, that the power isn't reliable even with this underground unit."

Mr. Nielsen took umbrage to the idea of “aesthetics being more important than our customers and our commercial centers having reliable power,” and noted the government's reliance on “the availability of those commercial properties to generate income.” This, he argued, depended heavily on a stable, consistent power supply. The CZM commissioner questioned the apparent contradiction that had arisen. “If I'm hearing from an expert that underground is super reliable, but they're underground right now and they're losing power, what am I supposed to believe?”

Both Mr. Bonnes and WAPA's interim director for transmission and distribution Cordell Jacobs, however, insisted that underground power was indeed more reliable. “You eliminate a lot of the nuisance tripping from vegetation, weather and other issues that afflict the overhead,” said Mr. Jacobs, while Mr. Bonnes stated, “all the components are rated to be completely submerged and the equipment is elevated” somewhat from the bottom. However, when Mr. Nielsen asked for empirical data to back up their assertions, neither man could provide any.

“What we're not going to do tonight, folks, is run us around,” Mr. Nielsen declared, noting that at least one member of WAPA's board had recently expressed similar sentiments. “You're coming before us weeks later and you still don't have a response,” he chastised. “We're not here to hear opinion. I want to hear something that seems factual,” Mr. Nielsen said. Absent solid data proving that undergrounding results in a more reliable electricity supply, “why aren't we advocating for a more hybrid approach?” Mr. Nielsen inquired, pointing out the millions spent relatively recently in procuring the composite poles in recent years.

Mr. Bonnes, however, was adamant, saying that his advocacy for undergrounding as much of the electrical infrastructure as possible was “based on experience with overhead systems versus underground systems” in general. He argued that reliability issues could be largely the fault of “upstream equipment failures,” not necessarily because of the underground equipment.

Mr. Nielsen remained unmoved, insisting that “power outages in Christiansted, more times than not, have been impacted by high storm surge or just high water events in that town.” He complained about the perceived evasiveness of the consultant, and expressed frustration that “representing the people of the territory comes with so much backlash when you ask very simple questions.”

An attempted intervention by CZM Director Marlon Hibbert to clarify the kind of information the commissioner was seeking did nothing to mollify Mr. Nielsen. “That advice should not be coming from the director of CZM, that advice should be coming from the subject matter experts who are being paid lucratively to do this work,” he insisted.

Adari Thomas, Associate Director of Project Management for the Super PMO, sought to assure Mr. Nielsen that the procurement process for the projects would use the “progressive design build” methodology, which would “allow for the selected contractor to be involved intimately in the detailed design.” This, in turn, would mean that the projects would be completed using industry best practices, “particularly as it pertains to installing underground electrical infrastructure in areas that are prone and susceptible to high levels of water infiltration,” Mr. Thomas said.

While Mr. Nielsen expressed appreciation for Mr. Thomas's assurances, he maintained that the preceding discussion exemplified a specific issue with work being done in the territory. “We've had enough of these conversations where I feel that the data is underwhelming, and this is not just a WAPA issue. I think it's across the territory.” He urged applicants to provide “stronger data” when approaching projects of this nature.

“The data that Commissioner Nielsen is looking for should already exist,” noted CZM assistant director Gregory Richards.

Ultimately, although CZM staff recommended that WAPA's applications for federal consistency determination for the three projects be approved, commissioners – after a lengthy executive meeting – did not feel they had enough information to move forward with a decision on the Christiansted and Frederiksted projects. “We are going to put these two agenda items on hold,” said chair Masserae Webster. “We are going to schedule a meeting as quickly as possible to discuss the concerns with WAPA regarding these two applications,” she said.

The project which spans the Catherine's Rest and Herman Hill areas, commissioners said, was less concerning to them since it would take place on higher ground. That federal consistency determination application was approved unanimously.

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