

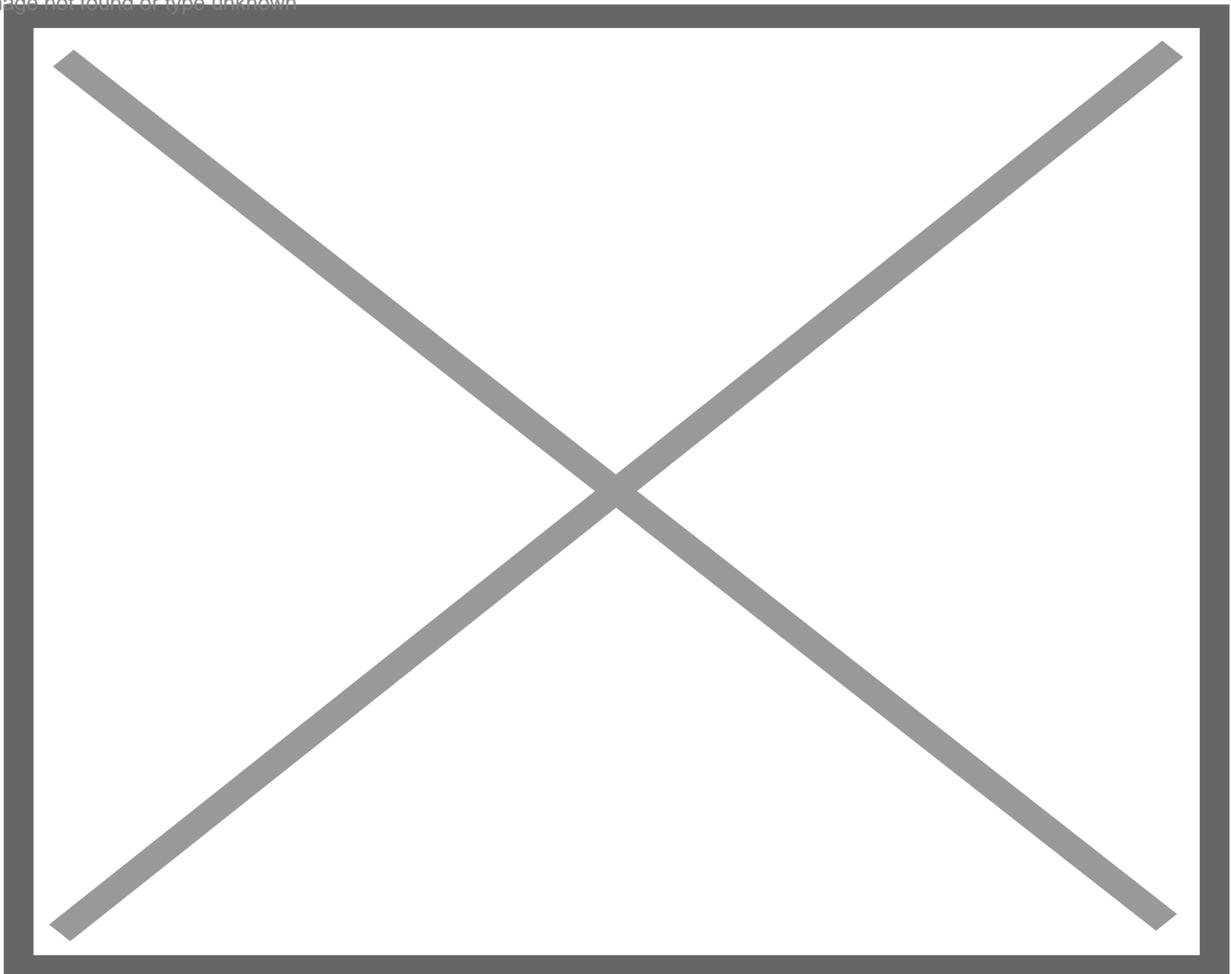
Waste Management Authority Proposes \$360 Annual Garbage Collection Fee to Be Added to Property Taxes

The Waste Management Authority seeks PSC approval for a \$360 annual garbage collection fee to offset \$20 million in costs. Lawmakers debate fairness, potential impacts on renters, and whether the fee should vary based on service levels and property type.

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The V.I. Waste Management Authority has announced its intention to charge an annual fee of \$360 to each household to generate funds for the collection of solid waste across the territory. The first step of the process will begin in March, when WMA will present its proposal to the Public Services Commission, according to the authority's interim executive director, Daryl Griffith.

Mr. Griffith, appearing before the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications on Friday, informed lawmakers that the current cost for garbage collection on St. Croix is \$6.5 million. This amount covers house-to-house, bin site, and convenience center collection, as well as collection in public housing, government agencies, schools, and green waste disposal. The same services cost \$3.9 million in St. Thomas. In St. John, WMA incurs costs to transport garbage by barge to the Bovoni Landfill totaling \$2.8 million. Along with salaries and benefits, solid waste collection costs the authority \$19,622,000 each year.

Faced with that \$20 million bill each year, WMA now hopes that charging a fee attached to property taxes will help the authority become more self-sustaining, a long-awaited goal. "The Virgin Islands is the only jurisdiction that does not charge for garbage collection, and we can no longer afford not to do so," Mr. Griffith contended. The implementation of a garbage collection fee is "designed to cover the cost of solid waste garbage collection throughout the entire territory," he said, adding that the new fee would cover "the services that you're currently getting for free, but even better."

The announcement influenced much of the conversation during Friday's meeting. Committee chair Senator Marvin Blyden was the first to comment on the plan, cautioning Mr. Griffith about the WMA "charging for services that it does not provide." He referenced the limited availability of house-to-house garbage collection in St. Thomas, where the terrain makes it difficult for garbage trucks to access some communities. Mr. Griffith, however, maintains that the fee would be appropriate in St. Thomas, where there are significantly more bin sites than St. Croix. "It cost us about \$2.6 million to maintain the bin sites in St. Thomas and in St. Croix, it's a fraction of the cost."

Senator Franklin Johnson too, harbored some hesitation toward the approach. "There must be a different charge for those who have door to door collection, versus those who carry the garbage to the convenience center," he offered. Despite their caveats, both lawmakers, like many of their colleagues who would speak after them, supported charging Virgin Islanders for garbage collection, albeit with caution. "Let's do our due diligence and assure that we take care of all areas and there's no loopholes," Senator Blyden added.

Since the new fee will be added to property taxes, Senator Carla Joseph was concerned about taxing some property owners twice, if they own undeveloped property as well as a home. "That undeveloped property isn't generating any type of solid waste or wastewater," she advised. According to Mr. Griffith, the \$360 amount was the result of dividing the \$19,622,000 waste collection figure by the number of houses across the property.

Outright opposition to WMA's plans for a garbage collection fee came from Senator Dwayne DeGraff. "I totally disagree with the \$360 increase," he stated. DeGraff was concerned that non-property owners, specifically renters, would be burdened with the cost as it is anticipated that landlords would pass the cost down. Instead, Mr. DeGraff suggested that WMA strengthen its enforcement efforts and collect what is owed to the authority through the payment of citations.

Senate President Milton Potter, though not against the fee, was concerned about whether residents of low-income housing would be charged \$360 as well. Mr. Griffith maintained that the intention is to attach the fee to property taxes, and told Mr. Potter that WMA has not considered a staggered fee. It will depend on the advice of the PSC, he said.

The Waste Management Authority will make its proposal to the Public Services Commission during a closed session. "Then the following week, after I get their recommendations, I'll make

some changes, and then I'll bring it to them out in the public," promised Mr. Griffith. According to the interim director, whose official capacity is WMA's chief financial officer, "I've been holding this [plan] for the last three years, since I got here at Waste Management."

With several cautionary notes issued by lawmakers, Mr. Griffith is adamant that "we have to think of all of those things, but we just have to start, though. We can't try to come up with the perfect solution before we start."

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