

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WAPA Board Approves Millions for Water Infrastructure, Delays \$8.9M AMI Contract Over Concerns About Vendor Experience

While contracts were approved for major water projects in St. Thomas, board members voted to delay action on an \$8.9M AMI contract, citing questions about the specific experience of selected vendors and the need for more due diligence.

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The board of the V.I. Water and Power Authority met on Thursday to vet and approve several new projects to improve the territory's water infrastructure, while holding back one key contract for the agency's metering system replacement project as they seek

more information on the companies behind it.

At issue was the contract to perform project management services for the utility's Automated Metering Infrastructure (AMI) replacement project over the anticipated four-year lifespan of that project. Out of four bids received, a joint proposal from Witt O'Brien and Z2 Solutions was the one which scored highest after the evaluation process, WAPA engineer Star Matthews told board members. While their cost estimate of \$8.9 million exceeded WAPA's internal costing of \$7.5 million, "overall, they have the most combined experience in project management and AMI subject matter," Ms. Matthews said.

Other proposals were all lacking in some way, she said. Some were from companies that did not meet the experience requirements, others only seem to have accounted for the first year of costs. Ms. Matthews described one bid as being so below WAPA's cost estimate that it "raised concerns that they may have looked over the key elements, resulting in unanticipated cost once the project commences."

Board members, however, wanted more information on whether Witt O'Brien had any specific experience with AMI projects. "My concern here is that they've chosen a partner that really is the one that has the skill set and has the history and has the street cred[it], and they're just kind of tagging along for the ride," said member Juanita Young. Z2 was confirmed as the subject matter experts and Witt O'Brien identified as the entity with significant project management experience within the region and the territory. "I just want to make sure that WAPA and the board understands what role each of these entities plays in this partnership," Ms. Young maintained.

When pressed, Ms. Young did not insist on taking consideration of the proposal temporarily off the table but board member Maurice Muia supported the idea. "I would be more willing to table this to dig in a little bit further to the experience and where the responsibilities lie," he said, seeking more information about Witt O'Brien's association with a larger corporate group from Brazil.

Board member Kyle Fleming cautioned that WAPA should be "moving...expeditiously, especially in alignment with some of the more critical engagements that are intended to bring some significant relief to consistent billing."

Ms. Young, while acknowledging the strong desire to move forward quickly with the project, provided a caution of her own. "Given our experience with the AMI system, I think that we want to make sure that we get it absolutely right this time. If that means more days to do some investigation, I have no issue with that."

With timeline a major factor, board members promised that a review could be conducted expeditiously, noting that a special meeting could be called in a week or two as soon as the matter was ready for a vote.

The motion to table passed with 3 votes in favor. Mr. Turnbull, the board's chair, and Mr. Fleming voted against further vetting of the contract.

Contracts were approved for several other projects, however, including replacing over 2700 linear feet of cast iron piping with PVC in Mahogany Estate, St. Thomas. The waterline rehabilitation project will need the services of an archaeologist, to ensure that a historic gravesite near the area of work remains undisturbed, board members were

informed. However, WAPA has had to work within these constraints on several previous occasions and expects little difficulty where that is concerned. The \$2.7 million contract was awarded to Island Roads Corporation.

The same company was awarded the contract for a second project – the completion of the Blackbeard Hill water line and pump station construction. Andrew Jarmack, manager of design construction for WAPA's water distribution division, assured board members that Island Roads has “seasoned staff that has worked on numerous public projects successfully...we see no reason that they won't be able to provide the labor and workers necessary for these projects.”

The \$3.3 million contract was easily approved. Both waterline rehabilitation projects are being funded by the EPA/DPNR Drinking Water Capital Improvement Grant.

The WAPA board also approved a no-cost time extension to Arcadis, the firm assisting the agency with complying with the consent decree with the EPA and Department of Justice that covers St. Thomas. Director of Project Management Maxwell George told board members that the company's services would be required during upcoming negotiations with the two federal agencies, thus necessitating the extension.