

The Virgin Islands Consortium

With Important Matters at Hand, Senators Will Hold Session With Precaution Paramount

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The Earl B. Ottley Legislative Building in May 2015. By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

The coronavirus pandemic has brought the world's economy to its knees, and among the casualties is the U.S. Virgin Islands, with its main product, tourism, literally crashing within days and bringing down with it critical dollars generated by the industry. Then there's the Water and Power Authority, which is not only calling for residents to pay their bills on time, but has implemented 60-day billing in an effort to collect more money to pay debt.

The central government, which Governor Albert Bryan recently said had only days cash on hand, needs funding to function. And in order to rein in WAPA, lawmakers must pass laws.

That's why today's Senate session is paramount: on the agenda are multiple items, the most pressing being a bill authorizing the Bryan administrant to seek loans through revenue anticipation notes totaling \$60 million to pay government employees and to run other functions of government.

Additionally, senators want to pass a bill requiring that WAPA suspend disconnections until June 1 or so long as Governor Bryan's recent state of emergency declaration stays in place.

Another measure to reduce the amount of time WAPA can back-bill customers to 35 days — essentially killing WAPA's 60-day billion cycle strategy — is also on the agenda.

But to do all of this and more in the age of coronavirus is tricky. Legislators have to meet to pass laws, but the virulent and highly transmittable Covid-19 is estimated to be [at least twice as contagious](#) as the regular flu and also more deadly.

In a release issued Thursday night, the Senate said it had taken precautions. Senators and staff will practice social distancing throughout the session, the Legislature said. It added that both senators and essential staff will be allowed to attend and participate at the session remotely. In addition, seating will be arranged in the Senate chambers to preserve social distance.

The Capitol Building remains closed to the public. The legislative proceedings will be broadcast by radio, television and internet.