

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Avery Lewis Bill to Bring Water and Fire Hydrants to Smith Bay Held Over Funding Questions

Lawmakers held Senator Avery Lewis' bill requiring WAPA to extend potable water service and install fire hydrants in Estate Smith Bay after raising concerns about the absence of a secured funding source for the estimated \$12.7 million project.

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Senator Avery Lewis. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

A bill requiring the V.I. Water and Power Authority to expand the potable water distribution system to Estate Smith Bay in St. Thomas, and install fire hydrants in that area, was held in committee over concerns about funding.

Bill 36-0206, sponsored by Senator Avery Lewis, was deliberated in the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning on Thursday afternoon.

In his tenure as St. Thomas and Water Island's administrator, Sen. Lewis said he "initiated efforts to expand access to portable water." The bill, he said, represents "commitment in action," evidence of his intention to continue his advocacy on the issue.

"Access to clean, reliable, portable water and adequate fire protection should never be considered a luxury in the Virgin Islands," Lewis said. He noted that residents in communities like Estate Smith Bay "have lived without the infrastructure that every modern community deserves."

As well as expanding access to pipe borne water, the bill would require WAPA to upgrade the existing system to ensure sufficient water pressure and install additional fire hydrants. The hydrants are considered "critical safeguards that can mean the difference between containment and catastrophe," Senator Lewis declared.

From the onset, the lawmaker addressed the apparent absence of a source of funds for his proposal. He explained that choosing not to tie WAPA to a single funding source was "intentional." Instead, Lewis informed listeners that the authority has access to "multiple grant opportunities, including federal funding avenues." WAPA, he clarified, had signaled its "commitment to pursue and include this project in upcoming grant submissions."

Indeed, WAPA's chief engineer with oversight of capital projects, Noel Hodge, promised to do just that. The authority has already received "many requests for potable water service," and Mr. Hodge agreed that doing so would "provide meaningful benefits" for residents and businesses. The expansion of WAPA's water lines to Estate Smith Bay would serve as a "supplemental source of water to the rainwater catchment system," particularly during the dry season.

The expansion was also viewed as an "economical and reliable alternative to bulk water purchases."

Mr. Hodge also explained the intricacies of the specific project, including that water would be gravity-fed from the existing Donoe tank to Estate Smith Bay and Frydendal. That tank has a capacity of 5.5 million gallons.

A project of that magnitude is expected to carry "significant" cost, with WAPA's estimate standing at \$12.7 million.

It will require "the installation of 21,000 linear feet of pipe, extensive trench excavations in the public roadway and pavement restorations," Mr. Hodge testified. In the end, approximately 250 customers would be connected and 42 hydrants would need to be installed based on international standards.

"The overall project schedule is estimated to be approximately 33 months," Mr. Hodge said. The timeline includes design, engineering services, bidding, construction, and commissioning. The timeline proposed in Bill 36-0206 is only one year. Mr. Hodge informed lawmakers that an extension would be required.

He adopted a somber tone, telling lawmakers that WAPA remains in a “structural deficit.” There is “no current internal funding available for this waterline expansion project,” he said.

According to Mr. Hodge, there were plans to expand the lines into Smith Bay even before Bill 36-0206 was drafted. The authority, therefore, has already begun exploring federal funding sources, but nothing has been confirmed.

In fact, WAPA has completed a master plan for water line expansion in St. Croix and is in the process of producing a similar document for St. Thomas/St. John. However, the authority is still trying to “find funding to make it a reality.”

The lack of secured funding bothered lawmakers who nonetheless supported the intent.

“The funding source is that important component that is needed to connect all the parts,” noted Senator Kurt Vialet.

Senator Carla Joseph, who is not a member of the committee but chairs the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, was also hesitant. “I am very cautious about supporting any bill that doesn't speak to a funding source directly,” she said.

The bill's sponsor attempted to defend the lack of a clear funding line, noting that WAPA has already presented several options. “There is a funding source and WAPA has it. It's called federal grants,” Senator Lewis stated.

Despite his best efforts, a motion to hold the bill passed with a 6-1 majority. Senator Dwayne DeGraff was the lone vote in favor of letting the measure proceed as written.

Senator Lewis has now urged his colleagues to “work collaboratively” to identify a local funding source to pay for the Estate Smith Bay expansion.