

WAPA Board Delays St. John Generator Decision as Members Push for All-New Units

Karl Knight said WAPA is ready to move quickly on standby generation for St. John with help from ODR, but board members objected to lightly used units and directed him to first make one more effort to secure all-new generators by May 1.

WAPA / **Published On April 24, 2026 06:22 AM /**

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During Thursday's meeting of the V.I. Water and Power Authority Governing Board, the debate over how to restore emergency generation to St. John centered on two competing pressures: speed and certainty.

WAPA Executive Director Karl Knight told board members the utility is trying to move quickly with an emergency standby power solution, backed by the Office of Disaster Recovery and an

executed contract structure with RG Engineering, but the board ultimately resisted moving ahead with lightly used generators and instead directed him to first make one more effort to secure all-new units for the island. Knight now has until Friday, May 1, to return with his findings.

According to Mr. Knight, WAPA is working with the ODR on the initiative. “They’re going to use their line of credit so that we can quickly pay down deposits,” he said. He also told the board that an executed contract with RG Engineering means the project can proceed within “the prudent replacement structure that’s been set in place,” suggesting that WAPA may not have to absorb the full cost of the purchases.

Mr. Knight pointed to an upcoming kickoff meeting early next week as a sign that the effort is advancing quickly. He said an initial attempt to acquire new machines was blocked because the needed accessories were unavailable. Still, he told the board that “there’s some other opportunities that I think might be a good, quicker substitute,” referring to another supplier that may be able to meet WAPA’s needs.

“We’re going through on doing due diligence to make sure that these are going to satisfy our needs and have the turnaround time,” Mr. Knight said, cautioning that the units under consideration from this supplier would likely be a mix of new and lightly used machines. He stressed that “None of the units that we’re looking at that are used have more than eight days worth of running hours on them,” adding, “So they’re in basically brand new condition.”

He said the exact units could be finalized within days, after which WAPA would be ready to move once the Office of Disaster Recovery tapped its line of credit to cover deposits. “I’m just waiting to get the operations team to give me the thumbs up on which direction we’re going to go in,” he said.

Responding to questions about the use of lightly used equipment, Mr. Knight emphasized that the units would serve as standby generation only. “The permitting that we utilize would likely limit them...to 500 running hours [annually], and they would only operate in the event that we lost generation at [Randolph] Harley,” he said. “They would only operate until generation was restored...they’re not intended to operate 24/7.”

He added that the only likely exception would be in the case of a major disaster such as a hurricane that knocked out generation for an extended period.

Mr. Knight also said each generator’s internal fuel tank would hold about a 24-hour supply. “As part of our buildout of...the whole microgrid concept, we’ll explore the opportunity to construct supplemental fuel storage,” he said. For the initial phase, however, he maintained that the built-in fuel capacity would be enough for a short-term outage or a brief period of power rotation. “If we do have a prolonged outage, then we’d have to replenish those generators daily,” he acknowledged.

Former board chair Hubert Turnbull said he was uncomfortable with the idea of sending used generators to St. John. Mr. Knight responded that time is the most critical factor in the procurement. “We can’t source units that meet our requirements and actually have the lead time,” he said. He added that the most heavily used machine under consideration had only 152 running hours, “which is about eight days.”

He argued that the units being considered were “ready to go,” already had enclosures, would not require transformers, and could be shipped quickly.

Mr. Turnbull remained unconvinced. “It’s unconscionable for me to sit on a board and believe it’s fine to just give used units to St. John. Personally what I would like to see is all new units for St. John.”

Mr. Knight replied that WAPA currently has no generation capacity on St. John at all. While he acknowledged that sending used units may not sound acceptable “from a lay person’s perspective,” he argued that generator longevity depends more on maintenance and running hours than age. “As a former plant operator, we got units in that plant for over 40 years...it’s not the age of the units, a lot of it has to do with the running hours and the maintenance,” he said. “These units haven’t even had enough running hours to get to a point where they need to have maintenance...these are fairly new condition.”

He said the generators had previously been used for standby service in another jurisdiction. “Quite frankly, in the States a standby generator doesn’t get that much running hours on it, because it just doesn’t have that many outages.”

Mr. Knight also said the generators would come with vendor warranties and that WAPA planned to pursue additional manufacturer warranties. “I’m very comfortable,” he said, adding that “the generators we’re looking at are American-made,” which he said would make parts and service easier to obtain.

“I don’t anticipate problems,” Mr. Knight said. “Everything will be tested. We’ll make sure they’re operating properly.”

He warned that if WAPA insisted on brand new generators, St. John could remain exposed to outages for another year or two. “I really want the opportunity to get about 10 megawatts of generation into St. John as quickly as we can.”

Other board members, however, aligned with Mr. Turnbull. Director Cheryl Boynes-Jackson said new generators would be preferable because “once they go there, we’re going to be in a set it and forget it position....WAPA basically is going to do an awesome job, but they’re not going to look back.”

In the end, Mr. Knight agreed to hold off on procurement while WAPA makes another effort to source all-new units for St. John. “I just want you to know I’m ready to pull the trigger,” he said. Even so, based on his assessment of current system stability, he said he believed “God will bless us with enough time to do what we have to do.”

Under the board’s direction, he now has until next Friday, May 1, to present his findings.