

The Virgin Islands Consortium

PSC Staff Push for Formal WAPA Complaint Plan as 164 Customer Cases Remain Outstanding

PSC staff said unresolved WAPA complaints are affecting efficiency and public confidence, while WAPA cited a 25% reduction in complaints, faster adjustments, fewer estimated bills and a need for clearer collaboration with regulators.

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WAPA's Richmond power plant.

The V.I. Water and Power Authority says it has reduced customer complaints and improved internal processes for handling billing disputes, adjustments and meter-related concerns, but Public Services Commission staff say the utility has not made enough

measurable progress to resolve a backlog of customer cases across the territory.

During Tuesday's PSC meeting, WAPA representatives appeared before commissioners to discuss ongoing challenges with customer complaint resolution. Tisean Hendricks, the PSC's assistant executive director, said 164 complaints remained outstanding territory-wide as of March.

"Many cases remain pending due to delayed adjustments, refunds, investigations and meter-related issues," Ms. Hendricks told commissioners. She said WAPA had acknowledged those issues during a February meeting and committed to improvement, but "measurable progress has not yet been achieved."

According to Ms. Hendricks, "these delays are impacting both operational efficiency and public confidence." She recommended that the PSC require WAPA to submit "a formal corrective action plan" with mandatory reporting requirements, clear resolution timeframes, and mechanisms for punitive action and/or penalties if the utility fails to improve or remains out of compliance.

WAPA Customer Service Director Marlene Francis pushed back against that assessment, saying the data shows "an approximate 25% reduction in complaints within one year." Given the declining backlog, Ms. Francis argued that the current circumstances "does not support the need for further Commission action at this time."

She also suggested that some delays identified by PSC staff are connected to the Commission's own complaint resolution process.

According to Ms. Francis, despite "extensive discussions" with Commission staff, "there continues to be an uncertainty surrounding the mathematical formula used to estimate accounts." That lack of clarity over methodology, she said, has caused some complaints to remain open longer than necessary.

Rather than adopting an adversarial approach built around sanctions or punishment for alleged non-compliance, Ms. Francis said the utility and regulator should work more closely together.

"I believe it would be more productive to discuss all matters contributing to delays directly with the staff in a collaborative setting," she suggested.

Ms. Francis said WAPA has taken several steps to improve service, including onboarding new managers to oversee customer service, customer account and media services. All three divisions now report to one director.

"We anticipate that this cross-functional approach would significantly improve the efficiency and consistency of complaint resolution," she said.

Meter replacements are also continuing, with work currently focused on St. John before transitioning to St. Thomas, Ms. Francis said.

She told commissioners that "the Authority has escalated the processing of customer accounts," and that adjustments can now be completed "within approximately 30 days following review."

WAPA has also reduced its reliance on estimated bills. Two years ago, approximately 30 percent of accounts were estimated, Ms. Francis said. That figure now stands at just over 15 percent.

“We anticipate that this downward trend will continue as the Authority advances the community replacement initiatives and operational improvements,” she declared.

However, Ms. Hendricks maintained that WAPA must do more. She said many complaints that reach the PSC involve “minor issues that can be resolved directly by the Water and Power Authority.”

Sasha Davis, the Commission’s utility staff assistant, agreed, noting that some complaints involve requested adjustments dating back to 2017. Ms. Francis acknowledged that some older cases are still awaiting resolution, but insisted that more recent complaints are being handled quickly.

WAPA Chief Financial Officer Lorraine Kelly said the utility currently has something of a two-track system for handling customer complaints. She said recent complaints are being processed more actively, while the utility has also been searching for older unresolved cases.

“In the last 6-12 months, we have had a very specific effort of looking and searching for any old accounts that have not been addressed and making sure that we address them,” Ms. Kelly assured.

PSC Chair David Hughes reminded staff that the Commission’s role in customer complaints changed several years ago, moving beyond simple consumer advocacy.

“We were given authority to resolve the complaints, not simply to make the customer’s complaint and hope that the utility agreed with us. We are, in effect, administrative law judges in this matter now, which means the consumer makes a complaint, WAPA answers the complaint, and we make a decision.”

Ms. Hendricks said the issue was not the PSC’s failure to exercise authority, but that in some instances, “when an adjustment is supposed to be applied, it’s not being applied.”

Ms. Francis said PSC instructions are not always straightforward or easy for WAPA to comply with.

“We have received complaints from the PSC from deceased customers and from people who are not authorized on customer accounts,” she noted, again calling for closer collaboration between the utility and the regulator to ensure complaints are resolved in a timely manner.

Ms. Hendricks concluded that PSC staff “may need to tweak the process and what we’re doing and just be more assertive in demanding specifically what the final outcome will be.”

Mr. Hughes said the matter did not appear “to be a problem where we need to talk about punitive action.” Instead, he encouraged PSC staff “to come up with firmer rules and guidelines and timetables that everyone in front of your court knows they have to abide by.”

