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## Senate Approves \$2.3 Million for UVI Free Tuition and \$2.1 Million for St. John Power Cable Repairs

Lawmakers advanced major appropriations for WAPA's St. John submarine cable repairs and UVI's free tuition program, approved \$100,000 for women's basketball travel, and rejected a \$479,486 Taxi Cab Commission technology request.

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Lawmakers approved several major appropriations during Thursday's Legislative Session, including \$2.1 million for the Water and Power Authority to repair or replace the submarine electrical transmission cables that serve St. John, and \$2.3 million for the University of the Virgin Islands' free tuition program.

The measures were among a series of special orders and non-germane amendments introduced during what became a marathon session. According to Senator Novelle Francis, chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance, the total amount of appropriations brought forward during the session reached \$7,065,000.

Mr. Francis placed the figure on the record and urged his colleagues to be “extremely careful.”

The \$2.1 million WAPA appropriation was included in Bill No. 36-0292, which was special ordered by At-Large Senator Angel Bolques Jr. The funding is intended for “the repair or replacement of the submarine electrical transmission cables that provide electricity to St. John.”

In March, WAPA reported that the sole cable electrifying St. John had been [deliberately damaged](#), resulting in an extended islandwide outage. Senator Bolques said the outage “made people's lives and livelihoods difficult, especially our elderly population, who require electricity for certain medications.”

Most lawmakers agreed that the appropriation was necessary to help prevent another electrical emergency of that scale. “We have to do everything to assure that it don't happen again,” Senator Franklin Johnson said.

Senator Carla Joseph also supported the funding, saying “We just can't stand still and do nothing.”

“It's unacceptable for us to have what happened to our brothers and sisters on St. John occur in this day and age,” Senator Marvin Blyden added.

The circumstances surrounding the damaged electrical line have been the subject of scrutiny. WAPA has maintained that [the cable was deliberately cut](#), while some in the community have questioned whether the issue was connected to deferred maintenance.

Senator Kurt Vialet said that “while the circumstances around the cutting a line of very fishy, at the end of the day they don't have any redundancy.”

Senator Kenneth Gittens encouraged WAPA to “move forward without any unnecessary delay.”

For Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, supporting the \$2.1 million appropriation was difficult because she viewed it as a way to “bail them out of them not doing their job.”

“I want St. John to get their money, but I'm not unintelligent,” she stated.

The bill was approved by the Legislature.

Lawmakers also approved Bill No. 36-0296, special ordered by Senator Vialet, to address funding for the University of the Virgin Islands' free tuition program.

The measure appropriates \$2.3 million to the University of the Virgin Islands Scholarship Revolving Fund and changes the funding source currently written in law. Mr. Vialet explained that the legislation would clear UVI's \$500,000 debt for the spring semester, while also covering the summer semester and the upcoming fall semester for both in-person and online students.

Funding for subsequent semesters will be addressed during the FY2027 budget process.

The bill also removes the provision that the fund be obligated against the Internal Revenue Matching Fund. Instead, the program will become an “obligation that will be coming from the

general fund up to \$3 million.”

Lawmakers then considered a request to transfer \$100,000 from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund to the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation. The money would cover expenses connected to the Virgin Islands senior national women’s basketball team’s participation in the International Basketball Federation tournament in Berlin, Germany.

Senator Bolques objected to the measure, saying the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund “has to be audited.” He said he did not oppose supporting sports, but his concern was “the Tourism Revolving Fund and the inaccuracies surrounding it.”

Senator Violet agreed that the fund should be audited, but said the current Tourism Commissioner is “controlling the reckless spending” previously associated with the staff.

A majority of lawmakers supported the request.

Immediately after opposing the use of the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund for the basketball team appropriation, Senator Bolques requested \$479,486.35 from the same fund for the Taxi Cab Commission.

The money would have been used for technological upgrades, “including the digitization of paper records and files, and hiring a consultant to advise on the most suitable equipment and software for technical upgrades.”

That request did not receive enough support.

Senator Gittens objected, saying the request came at a time when “the public is demanding transparency, efficiency, and measurable performances from government agencies.”

“Why would we, in good conscience, support additional funding of such for an entity that many of us know have failed miserably to effectively fulfill its mission?” he asked.

During a November 2025 hearing, several stakeholders in the taxi industry appeared before the Legislature and agreed that the Taxi Cab Commission must digitize its records. Senator Bolques cited that need as justification for seeking the appropriation from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund.

However, Senator Gittens reminded lawmakers that the Commission had since been called before the Legislature twice and failed to appear. “Since the November that he’s talking about, the entity was called here twice, and they have not showed,” Senator Gittens said.

Senator Francis Heyliger then questioned Senator Bolques about his earlier objection to using the same fund for the basketball team. She asked whether there was “any concern about using the same fund to spend almost a half a million without this very audit.”

Senator Bolques replied that following correspondence with the Department of Finance and the Office of Management and Budget, “there is funding in the fund.”

Despite that assurance, he was unable to convince a majority of lawmakers to support the request, and the measure failed.