

Water-Line Rupture Sends CAHS, Lockhart Students Home Early; Lawmakers Question School Reliance on WAPA

CAHS and Lockhart K-8 dismissed students early after a waterfront water-line rupture cut service. Senators questioned why school cisterns are not used as primary sources, while VIDE disclosed bottled-water needs and ongoing water purchases at schools.

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ST. THOMAS — A ruptured public water line forced early dismissal at Charlotte Amalie High School and Lockhart K-8 School on Wednesday, exposing broader concerns over why functioning school cisterns are often secondary to WAPA service even as water interruptions, bottled-water needs and questions about testing affect campuses across the territory.

Craig Benjamin, chief executive officer of the Bureau of School Construction and Maintenance, told the Committee on Education and Workforce Development that circumstances at both St. Thomas schools had led them to rely on the public system.

Ongoing demolition at Charlotte Amalie High School prompted a move to the public water line, while modernization work at Lockhart K-8 also influenced the decision to connect that facility to the V.I. Water and Power Authority.

“The failure happened with the eruption of the water line down at the waterfront, and it affects everybody upstream that's on that line,” Mr. Benjamin said.

Senator Avery Lewis questioned why school cisterns are not maintained as a primary source capable of keeping campuses operating when WAPA service is interrupted.

“This is the reason why we have cisterns in the Virgin Islands, you know, so we can move forward, so school don't have to be interrupted,” Sen. Lewis said, arguing that the disruption represented a “disservice” to teachers and students.

Lawmakers learned that several schools have functioning cisterns but normally rely on WAPA. Among them are Eulalie Rivera K-8 School, St. Croix Central High School and St. Croix Educational Complex.

BSCM School Facilities Maintenance Assistant Manager Bobby Ferris said those campuses can switch sources during disruptions.

“Whenever the pressure drop low, they go on cistern water,” he said.

Senators Press for Broader Water Testing

The discussion also turned to water quality following the recent detection of E. coli in WAPA drinking-water samples in Frederiksted.

Senator Franklin Johnson asked whether school water was being tested “especially since WAPA put out this test example that they found E. coli bacteria in some of the water down in the farther west.”

Mr. Ferris initially answered affirmatively, but later clarified the focus of BSCM’s testing program.

“Even though we test all the water, we concentrate mainly on the water that goes into the cistern for testing,” he said.

Senator Kurt Violet urged BSCM to implement comprehensive testing, saying public-system water entering schools should also receive close attention.

“Because there've been issues with the water coming into the schools, so it needs to be tested,” he said.

BSCM is also upgrading school pump rooms and filtration systems. Mr. Benjamin said schools with cisterns currently have filters, but broader improvements are underway.

BSCM is “in the process of updating our pump rooms, and that's included in our overall scope for all the pump rooms in the territory to be updated with the proper filtration system,” he said. The planned systems will include ultraviolet filtration as an additional safeguard.

St. Croix Schools Buying Water for Kitchens

Water problems are also creating additional operating costs for schools on St. Croix.

District Superintendent Carla Bastian-Knight told lawmakers that schools are purchasing water for use in their kitchens, a practice she acknowledged is “not sustainable.”

During VIDE’s portion of Wednesday’s hearing, Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington said she was also aware that Charlotte Amalie High School had requested donations of bottled water.

Students at the school have complained that “the water tastes funny,” she said, and some have stopped using the campus water bubblers to refill their reusable bottles.

VIDE has consequently begun supplying water to some schools.

On St. Croix, Ms. Bastian-Knight said administrators have resorted to “creative ways to purchase water.” Community partners have been “generous” with donations, she said, while the district also provides financial assistance when possible.

“When funding is available, we offset some of those expenses for the schools as well,” she said.

The combination of Wednesday’s interruption and the territory’s broader water problems prompted lawmakers to push Education officials to plan farther ahead rather than responding after shortages affect school operations.

Senator Dwayne DeGraff recommended that VIDE “project cost issues probably six months out to be ahead of that situation, rather than waiting for it to become a bigger crisis, and then we don't have any water at all.”