

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VI Residents Circulating Petitions Against WAPA 'Streetlights Bill'

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Ernice Gilbert **October 03, 2014**



On Wednesday morning, the *VI Consortium* [reported](#) that senators of the 30th Legislature, late on Tuesday night, signed a measure giving WAPA the authority to bill Virgin Islands' residents for the usage of streetlights. [The story sent the territory into an upheaval](#) because residents here already pay some of the highest energy rates in the world. But this time, instead of complaining, people are taking action online -- a sign of how the world has changed as it relates to people uniting for causes that affect their lives.

There are already two petitions circulating the internet, both of them doing respectably well, and all with the same goal: to prevent the Virgin Islands Government and WAPA from passing the cost of keeping public streetlights on to VI residents.

The first, [organized by a St. Thomas resident](#) through the We the People organization, seeks to garner 100,000 votes by October 31, petitioning the Obama Administration to block the VI Government from implementing the measure, passed by eight senators late on Tuesday night.

The blurb reads:

This petition is set in motion to prevent (WAPA) Water and Power Authority of The Virgin Islands, from billing consumers for the provision of streetlights. The Water and Power Authority will be able to bill customers for the provision of street lights, after an amendment, sponsored by Senators gave the semi-autonomous entity the power to pass the expense on to customers when the company reduces the LEAC, fuel surcharge.

Another petition, [created on Change.org by Virgin Islander, David Baird](#), seeks only 200 signatures and calls on Gov. John de Jongh to line-item veto the measure tagged on to the government's main budget of \$558.1 million.

An excerpt from the petition reads:

The Senate has passed legislation to transfer past and future street lighting costs, previously a government budget responsibility, to the electric consumers, as an add-on to their Water And Power Authority bills. This legislation is a blatant disregard for government responsibility to provide public safety in a fair and equitable manner. Furthermore, the retroactive provision is a double-dip cost, since we, tax payers, already paid to fund street lights, and the government deliberately chose not to pay the cost. We are being devoured by the vultures elected to protect our interests.

As of press time, the petition created on We The People was nearing 1,600 supporters -- it needs 100,000 signatures to succeed; while the petition created on Change.org only needs 200, and was 21 supporters shy of reaching its goal.

Power bills in the [territory are expected to be reduced by 30 percent](#) once WAPA's propane initiative goes online in the first quarter of 2015. An amendment to the Government's 2015 budget, championed by St. Thomas Senator Clifford Graham, takes some of the savings away by allowing WAPA to bill streetlight usage fees to residents. The amendment essentially takes a government obligation of keeping roadways lit and passes the expense down to customers.

In early September, WAPA Executive Director Hugo Hodge testified before [the senate](#) that the government owed over \$11 million in unpaid streetlight bills. The funds currently allocated to paying for streetlights, which is taken from property tax revenues, will be restored to the treasury.

At the Tuesday night hearing, where senators were able to narrowly avoid losing health insurance benefits for over 7,000 government employees, some lawmakers expressed their misgivings with the amendment, and St. Croix senator Nereida "Nellie" Rivera-O'Reilly advocated for the measure to be placed in committee for further consideration.

“If this amendment is approved, then the WAPA bills will drastically increase,” Rivera-O’Reilly said, adding it should be immediately “taken off the agenda.”

Graham countered, reasoning that the territory’s roads are dark because the streetlights no longer work, and that adding the amendment would not only make the roads safer, but also aid in balancing the budget. The amendment was passed with a majority of eight senators.

Those who voted for and against the amendment are as follows:

1. Senator Craig Barshinger — Yes
2. Senator Judi Buckley — No
3. Senator Diane Capehart — Yes
4. Senator Donald G. Cole — Yes
5. Senator Kenneth Gittens — No
6. Senator Clifford Graham — Yes
7. Senator Alicia “Chucky” Hansen — No
8. Senator Myron Jackson — Yes
9. Senator Shawn-Michael Malone — Yes
10. Senator Terrence “Positive” Nelson — No
11. Senator Nellie Rivera-O’Reilly — No
12. Senator Clarence Payne — Yes
13. Senator Tregenza A. Roach — No
14. Senator Sammuel Sanes — No
15. Senator Janette Millin Young — Yes

The outcry and subsequent action taken by residents have been one of the more pronounced online efforts to affect change in the territory. And while the Change.org petition will soon reach its goal of 200 signatures, the We The People effort, even if it does not arrive at 100,000 signatures (we’re hoping it does), will be a strong enough statement that will no doubt cause elected officials to take notice.

[They already are.](#)