

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Christensen On 'Streetlights Bill': "The People Cannot Take Another Burden"

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The Senate should find other ways to pay the Water and Power Authority for street lights usage, and not pass the bill on to Virgin Islands' residents already dealing with rising healthcare costs, the rising cost of food and stagnant salaries, Delegate to Congress and gubernatorial candidate, Donna Christensen, told the *VI Consortium* in an exclusive video interview, adding that "the people cannot take another burden."

"That's a very difficult measure," Christensen said, referring to Clifford Graham's [infamous 'Streetlights Bill'](#), passed by a narrow vote count of 8-7. "We're mandated by law to pass a balanced budget, and I think everybody should appreciate the difficulty the senate had in passing a balance budget. [However], I would hope that we could find

another way to pay for it because we know that the people of the territory, between WAPA, high food and low salaries, and many waiting for retroactive monies to be paid, really cannot take on another burden."

The Delegate highlighted the percentage of residents' property tax payments already allocated to paying for street lighting and said that while she believes "only a few dollars" would be deducted from the savings that WAPA has promised once the propane tanks are installed, she would rather that the monies come from elsewhere.

Christensen then made mention of a public-private partnership, proposed to her by an undisclosed person, that would see the streets of the Virgin Islands being properly lit, while saving the Government of the Virgin Islands some money.

"I emailed the person over the weekend and said, 'please send me your proposal, I want to take a look at it.' I don't know if it's going to work for us, but that might be an alternative so that everybody could realize the full deduction in their WAPA bill."

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 pay for street lighting, which is taken from property tax revenues, will be restored to the treasury.

At a hearing last Tuesday night, where senators were able to narrowly avoid losing health insurance benefits for over 7,000 government employees, some lawmakers expressed their misgivings with Graham's 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