

The Virgin Islands Consortium

De Jongh Surprised By 'Streetlights Bill': "This Is Not Something That We Ever Envisioned"

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Governor de Jongh on Monday expressed surprise and disappointment by the 30th Legislature's controversial 'Streetlights Bill' [that gives WAPA the authority to charge residents for street light usage](#), saying that it is not something his administration "ever envisioned," and was another example of the 30th Legislature's "inconsistency" in its annual financial blueprint.

"I was surprised to see that the Legislature wants to shift the cost of street lights to the consumer through adding the expense to individual Water and Power Authority bills," de Jongh said. "This is not something that we ever envisioned, and is another example of the Legislature's overall inconsistency in tackling the budget."

He continued, "In a perfect world, the budget process allows for all parties - Executive Branch and Legislature - to work together to develop an annual financial blueprint that is palatable to everyone and minimizes the impact on any particular group or department. That is not what is happening here."

The Governor's chastisement of the Senate's move to pass on street light usage payments to consumers came as part of broader comments on the fiscal year 2015 budget, passed by the 30th Legislature last week.

"My proposed budget included measures to increase revenues and decrease expenditures in an effort to close the projected economic gap," de Jongh said. "However, I'm not sure what message the Senate is sending with this budget, as there is no consistent pattern to the modifications."

With that, the Governor said "the senators have reduced the budgets for two departments that are revenue-generating, namely the Bureau of Internal Revenue and the Lt. Governor's Office, and yet increased the budgets for the Legislature and Superior Court."

De Jongh further pointed out he had submitted his budget proposal to the Senate on June 17, in which, he contends, a projected gap of \$150 million was addressed.

"I find this process very frustrating, as the Executive Branch has spent considerable time and manpower on finding workable solutions to the complex financial environment in the Virgin Islands," he added. "Our overriding goal has been to maintain economic activity in the territory while also maintaining stability for our employees and the business community."

De Jongh then revealed the communication between the territory's leadership is non-existent.

"The fact of the matter is that there are no dialogues or communications from the Senate to the Executive Branch about the territory's financial challenges," he said. "Instead, the senators use media outlets to postulate intents that are not founded in any reality."

The Governor has until early next week to review and return the budget to the 30th Legislature with changes, and said the "Legislature will then make its determination as to how it responds accordingly."

Recap

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.

Image Courtesy: *JaxFaxCaribbean*