

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Governor De Jongh Vetoes Contentious 'Streetlights Bill'

VIC News / **Published On October 16, 2014 11:07 PM /**

Cynthia Graham **October 16, 2014**



After much public outcry in recent weeks, on Wednesday night, Gov. John P. de Jongh, Jr. vetoed legislation that sought to remove the District Street Lighting Fund and allow the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority to charge its customers for maintaining and installing street lights in the territory. This action was one of several final pieces of legislation the Governor took action on that made up the Fiscal Year 2015 budget for the Virgin Islands government.

In vetoing this section of the legislation, the Governor wrote in his transmittal letter to Senate President Shawn-Michael Malone that “while I agree that the Legislature must determine an effective way to fund the cost of street lighting, it would be just as

appropriate to hear the community's voice on this matter and hold hearings to obtain the necessary guidance from all those who would be impacted."

Furthermore, Governor de Jongh noted that the potential revenue that would be reaped through the streetlight measure "does not justify the lack of process and public input," according to a release issued by Government House.

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, would have taken some of the savings away by allowing WAPA to bill streetlight usage fees to residents.

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 a hearing later in September, 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

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