

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Workers Torch Heavy Equipment, Jeep Liberty In Protest Over VITOL Off-Island Hires, Senator Says (UPDATE)

VIC News / **Published On April 28, 2015 11:27 AM /**

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UPDATE: Jean P. Greaux, Jr., Director of Corporate Communications at WAPA, made contact with the Consortium and said that, despite Senator Francis' assertion that the torched Jeep Liberty and Heavy Equipment happened as a result of unfair hiring practices by Vitol and was perpetrated by disgruntled employees; authorities investigating the incident have classified the occurrence as an act of arson, as no information has been made available as to who committed the crime.

Furthermore, Greaux said the workers that Vitol hires are not WAPA employees, so the semi-autonomous entity is not responsible for the contractor or its subcontractors' actions.

Earlier...

ST. CROIX – On a day when Gov. Kenneth Mapp was photographed with the top federal law enforcement official in the land at Government House announcing public safety will be foremost at Carnival 2015, a bombshell story that someone on the Virgin Islands Water & Power Authority grounds had purposely torched equipment and transportation valued in the hundreds of thousands of dollars dominated the news day.

Sen. Novelle Francis, Jr. – a former Virgin Islands territorial police chief – reinforced the dangers of WAPA workers on edge during a meeting of the Senate Rules and Judiciary Committee. Francis was the first senator to first broached the subject



Torched crane at a WAPA

parking lot for VITOL employees in Christiansted

The Senate voted unanimously to send three of Mapp's Cabinet nominations – Vivian Ebbesen-Fludd for Commissioner of Human Services, Mona Barnes for Director of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), and Catherine Hendry for Labor Commissioner to the full legislative body for confirmation.

But not before Francis related that WAPA workers were so disgruntled over Vitol Virgin Islands Corp. hiring people from Puerto Rico to do jobs local residents could do – that they would set a heavy equipment crane, bulldozer and a sport utility vehicle on fire in protest over the hires.

Last week Mapp denied several times having any knowledge about the off-island hires by Vitol when asked during a radio call-in show by a random telephone caller about the workers from Puerto Rico being hired at WAPA. The governor denied knowledge even while the Department of Labor was conducting an investigation into the off-island hires at the very same time.

Hendry was the last person to testify before the committee – but she was the first executive branch official to confirm what St. Thomas Sen. Jean Forde first brought to the

public's attention – the news that Vitol had allegedly hired workers from Puerto Rico in contravention to Virgin Islands law.

Under questioning from Forde, Hendry admitted that Vitol, the company that is converting the Virgin Islands Water & Power Authority to use propane gas to generate electricity, is “under investigation” for allegedly hiring workers from Puerto Rico to do menial jobs such as laying tile.



Imaged WAPA equipment – S.

Torched Jeep Liberty at a

WAPA parking lot for VITOL employees in Christiansted

“There is something brewing here that could go out of order,” Francis said. “I don’t support what they’re doing, but I understand it.”

A recent site visit to WAPA’s Estate Richmond power generating plant by *The Virgin Islands Consortium* revealed that workers had in fact burned several pieces of heavy equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars – including a crane, a bulldozer and a Jeep Liberty vehicle – in the protest over off-island hires by Vitol.

VI Consortium has conducted several investigations into the matter of off-island employees being hired over local workers. Read part 1 of our investigative [here](#), and part 2, [here](#).

In relation to the nomination hearing, Ebbesen-Fludd was the first to testify before the committee at the Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room.

“I have also recognized that I was being prepared for the role even before I recognized it through my personal and professional experiences as a nurse who always had compassion for the less fortunate,” Ebbesen-Fludd said.

Many senators, including Sen. Nereida Rivera-O’Reilly, noted that Ebbesen-Fludd’s background was primarily in the field of health and that she was even the Commissioner of Health under former Gov. John de Jongh for nearly two years, but the nominee said that health and human services go together – and that was why the department is called that in the United States government.

Under questioning from Francis, Ebbesen-Fludd said she did not know why people have had to wait two years on a waiting list and still have not been able to access the Energy CAP or “ECAP” program that distributes two propane tanks per year to those in financial need. She said she has completed the necessary paperwork for a gas supply program once it is approved by Property & Procurement.



Vivian Ebbesen-Fludd, commissioner designee of the V.I.

Human Services

“You are – in my opinion – commissioner material par excellence,” Sen. Neville James said of Ebbesen-Fludd.

Ebbesen-Fludd said her proposed salary is \$117,000 annually, but that it only works out to \$13.30 per hour if you consider that she is on call 24 hours per day and 365 days per year. That remark drew skepticism from Sen. Janette Millin Young, who said “that means you don’t sleep.”

“I really don’t, senator,” Ebbesen-Fludd replied.

The next testifier was Barnes, but before she began her testimony, 13-year-old Kerbassie Augustin, a student at Elena Christian Junior High School, spoke in support of the nominee.

“As a leader, she has what it takes to lead, just her mere presence in a room commands respect, let alone when she begins to speak,” Augustin said. “She is a professional’s professional and still is able to be true and down to earth when it’s all said and done.”

Barnes said her proposed salary is \$97,000 and under questioning from senators said that she was willing to use some of her salary in order to fund a needed deputy director of operations for VITEMA.

“Within the next six months, I will develop and update VITEMA’s plans, including the Tsunami Incident Annex, the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters plan, V.I. Territorial Emergency Operations Plan (TEOP), which serves as the official playbook for how the territorial government coordinates as effective disaster response and recovery,” Barnes said. “The TEOP, which is the most crucial plan in our resource bank, has not

been updated since 2010.”

Hendry, who was once the attorney on staff for Labor, is now tasked with heading up that



VITEMA Director designee Mona Barnes

“My vision for the Virgin Islands Department of Labor (VIDOL) is a ‘roadmap of action’ and how Team VIDOL can pull out all the stops,” Hendry said. “We will do our best through partnerships and service executions that will allow us to develop a strong, skilled workforce, create jobs and enable businesses to thrive. These actions support the mission of the VIDOL which is ‘to administer a system of effective programs and services designed to develop, protect and maintain a viable workforce.’”

Hendry said her proposed salary is \$97,000 as was her predecessor’s. Under questioning from Senate President James, Hendry said 460 youngsters (280 on St. Croix and 180 on St. Thomas) had applied for the department’s summer work program.

“That requires money at a time when we’re struggling,” James said.