

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hodge Unveils \$800 Million Plan To Overhaul Water System, Says Impetigo And WAPA Not Linked

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ST. CROIX -- Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority Executive Director Hugo Hodge Jr., in an interview with The Consortium on Saturday, [refuted claims made by Senator Kurt Violet](#) that the impetigo outbreak on this island was somehow a result of rusty water that sometimes flow to residents faucets as a result of WAPA's aging pipe infrastructure.

"I equally share the frustration with the water discoloration," Hodge told this publication. "It's rust and it's an eye sore, but residents should not be afraid of washing their hands and using the water because it's not connected to impetigo. Impetigo is airborne so it cannot be a WAPA issue. Nothing in the water is hazardous."

Mr. Hodge said the discoloration of the water, which at times appears brown, is indeed a complication caused by the aging pipe system, some of which he said was installed some 80 years ago. "They've more than lived their lives," Mr. Hodge stated.

The chief executive then revealed to The Consortium that WAPA currently has a plan on the table, for which a request for proposal will be issued in about a month, that would see the territory's entire water system moving away from metal pipes to PVC. It would cost \$800 million, Mr. Hodge made known, half for this island and half for the St. Thomas-St. John district.

Asked about financing, Mr. Hodge said the current system loses about 20 percent of water here (up to 40 percent during earthquakes) and 15 percent on St. Thomas, and said the savings that would be realized because of the installation of PVC would pay for the project. And potential companies with the wherewithal to execute the work have already been identified, Mr. Hodge noted. However, because WAPA is "very mindful of the public's dollar," a complete procurement process will be initiated before a final bidder is chosen.

Most of the current system was constructed between 1987 and 1988, according to Mr. Hodge. He said the pipes that were used at the time were made with corrosive material, and some of the work was not properly performed -- a reality that exacerbates the already daunting problem. Because of this, Mr. Hodge told The Consortium that WAPA is hoping a firm to produce the work will be identified by the middle of next year.

Even so, a decision on what exactly WAPA will do to overhaul the water system in the territory hasn't been set in stone, Hodge said, stating that the semi-autonomous entity remains "flexible" and open to the ideas of professionals in the piping field. Specifically, Mr. Hodge made mention of a method called "pigging", which, instead of replacing the current pipes with PVC, the pipes would instead be coated with a PVC material that stops corrosion. It's a method that would save money, however whether the practice can be performed on 80-year-old pipes will not be answered until engineers perform tests.

As for Senator Kurt Violet's assertion that the Department of Planning and Natural Resources fine WAPA for the rust water, Mr. Hodge said the senator told him that he was not attempting to blame WAPA for the airborne infection. The remarks, Violet said, were made to encourage accountability at the firm.

"WAPA's water in certain parts of the island comes out brown and residents can't use it," Mr. Violet told The Consortium in a brief phone interview on Thursday, adding that WAPA is well aware of the problem, but has yet to solve it.

Mr. Violet, a former principal at Arthur A. Richards Junior High School, said he had to install filters throughout the school's water system in order to get clean water.

"The house owner or the person living in the housing community should not be responsible for making sure that WAPA's systems transport clean water to their faucets," Mr. Violet contended. He said if officials at WAPA — who haven't been successful in solving the problem — can't find a solution, they should not be used.

"People have to be accountable in this community, Mr. Violet said. "We must stop making excuses. If a company can't do the job, get rid of it," he said.

Mr. Hodge said conversations around overhauling the water system has been challenging because "it's a high dollar amount and you have to do the entire thing, not just sections. So it becomes tedious and difficult."

Soon, however, the public will see a "significant effort" being waged once the project's plan comes to the fore.

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