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WAPA to Account for CARES Act Credits on Friday During Gittens-Initiated Hearing

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At the request of Senator Kenneth Gittens, the Virgin Islands Water & Power Authority will come before members of the 33rd Legislature on Friday to detail the disbursement of the \$15.5 million allocated to the utility from the federal CARES Act, Mr. Gittens office has announced.

The money was to be distributed to ratepayers in the form of credits on their May monthly bills, however, many questions remain about how exactly how these funds were expended and what, if any, balance exists, Mr. Gittens said.

In a release issued last week, WAPA said as of July 8, credits were issued to 44,182 residential account holders while 7,676 credits were issued to commercial account customers. The value of the issued credits totals \$14,883,500. Commercial accounts were credited \$500, and residential

accounts \$250.

The authority urged any active electrical account holder who may have not received the YES Cares Act credit, to contact WAPA Customer Service at 340-774-3552 or 340-773-2250, select option 5. A customer service representative will review the account, and, if necessary, make any required adjustments.

“Any remaining funds should further assist ratepayers,” Mr. Gittens said. “But first we need a thorough accounting of how this \$15.5 million was spent. Given the significant amount of federal money involved and the problematic state of WAPA’s operations we must act to assure these credits were distributed fairly and accurately.”

The senator said that during the Committee of the Whole hearing — scheduled for 10 a.m. on St. Thomas — senators will also be looking closely at what steps WAPA has taken to address some of the waste and abuse uncovered at the utility.

“I requested that the Senate President specifically invite members of WAPA’s financial team, to include the individual who conducted the internal investigation of the more than \$2 million apparently sent to an offshore bank,” he said. “We also have much to follow up on in terms of WAPA’s various leases and contracts.”

Mr. Gittens said that while the COVID-19 pandemic had slightly delayed enacting new policies to reform WAPA, it had also made addressing these matters even more pressing given the Territory’s economic downturn and the lack of reliable service, particularly while safer at home orders were in effect. Pending measures include a ratepayers “Bill of Rights”, increased qualifications for WAPA Board members and the imposition of greater fiscal restraints on the utility.

“WAPA’s sky high rates and frequent outages are challenging almost every member of this community,” Mr. Gittens said. "And we certainly can’t grow and diversify our economy the way we need to without reliable and affordable power. I would like to thank Senate President Novelle Francis for agreeing to my request that WAPA be brought back before the Legislature so that we may continue to exercise our oversight authority and work to get the answers, as well as the service, our people deserve."