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At WAPA Hearing, Vague Responses on Fluctuating Power Bills, Opposition to Board Dismantling for New Oversight Board

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Lawmakers who participated in Friday's Committee of the Whole hearing were treated to a lack of straightforward responses from Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority testifiers. The Committee of the Whole hearing was called for two purposes: for an update on the YES Cares Act Funds, which saw WAPA receiving some \$15 million from federal pandemic grants — given to the authority by the Bryan administration to provide residential customers with a \$250 rebate and \$500 for businesses.

Additionally, Bill No. 33-0346 — which seeks to establish a Management and Oversight Review Committee that replaces the board and aims to keep the authority accountable for a minimum of three years — was discussed at the hearing.

In reference to YES Cares Act funds, testimony from WAPA CEO Lawrence Kupfer revealed that as of July 8, 2020, 44,182 residential accounts received the \$250 credits, while 7,676 commercial accounts received the promised \$500. Mr. Kupfer also said that \$600,000 remain undistributed, an amount that is equivalent to approximately 2,400 residential customers. WAPA plans to return any balance to the Government of the V.I. once the authority has determined all its customers received the rebate.

During recent WAPA protests, some members of the community shared that after they received their credits, they noticed a spike in their power bills. This concern was brought up by Senator Kenneth Gittens, who called for the WAPA hearing. The lawmaker wanted to know if complaints relative to this issue were received by the authority. Marlene Francis, customer service manager at WAPA, said that once a complaint is received by customer service, the customer's bill is cross-checked with the AMI system and a site visit is conducted to read the meter. "There has been rare cases where the authority's system has not produced an accurate bill," she said.

Estimated bills, Ms. Francis said, are sometimes the cause of bill increases and the reason a customer may complain about an inaccurate bill, a statement that Senator Kurt Vialet said does not make sense mathematically. He explained, "An estimated bill should be based on the average of the past month's bill. It shouldn't spike drastically. That is literally impossible."

Senator Novelle Francis also pressed WAPA testifiers on the authority's use of the same "faulty AMI system"—as he called it—to make an assessment on a bill in question by a customer.

Mr. Francis raised the issue of frequent complaints from residents about WAPA's customer service since its offices do not accept customers inside at this time, due to the pandemic. Initial testimony from Mr. Kupfer glossed over this change in service, the senator said.

Currently, customers can receive customer service assistance by means of walk-up windows, phone calls, or email, as relayed by Ms. Francis. Residents on the island of St. Croix complained to The Consortium that the outdoor walk-up window service required sometimes three-hour wait times when there were only half a dozen people ahead in line.

Relative to Bill No. 33-0346, WAPA CEO Kupfer read a letter requesting that it be tabled and did not provide testimony addressing the bill. Meanwhile, Public Service Commission (PSC) Executive Director Donald Cole shared brief testimony on the measure's requirements for each of the proposed five members of the management committee. "It may be difficult to fill the specified criteria with locally available expertise," he said. "It will be difficult to find the personnel with the requisite level of experience who are not past or present members of the Water and Power management or board."

Another concern of Mr. Cole was that certain parts of the bill were already required by law and overlap with existing provisions.

Senator Javan James expressed that the territory's sole electric and water service authority gave unsatisfactory service for decades. He said WAPA continues to evade questions at hearings and does not uphold its slogan, 'Working for You'. The authority also failed to discipline employees who were guilty of wrongdoing, as stated by Mr. Vialet. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory stressed the need for WAPA to have oversight.

In reference to W.A.P.A.'s pattern of behavior and history of bad management, Mr. Vialet said, "We can't get better if we tolerate it. We can't get better if this is what is expected."

He added, “The board has to put their foot down and micromanage the inner workings of that entity, because all of the deals are filled with a cloud of uncertainty.”

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