

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Julio Rhymer Heads To OMB In January; Mapp Says 'Culture' At WAPA Must Change

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Julio Rhymer, who has been the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority's executive director for less than a year, will leave his position at WAPA at the end of this month and head to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), where he will replace Nellon Bowry as director, Governor Kenneth Mapp made known during his hurricane recovery press briefing on Monday, which Mr. Mapp said would be his last weekly recovery-related press event.

Mr. Bowry, at the beginning of the governor's first term in office, only committed to serve one year as OMB director but wound up staying with the administration for three years. Mr. Mapp said he was told by the outgoing director that he wanted to do a number of

things outside of government.

"Being budget director in a government with little cash is not easy," Mr. Mapp said as he went on to thank Mr. Bowry for his service. Mr. Bowry's last day at OMB will be Jan. 31, 2018, which will give Mr. Rhymer at least two weeks with Mr. Bowry for a seamless transition, the governor said.

Mr. Mapp will submit Mr. Rhymer's name to the 32nd Legislature for vetting. Clinton Hendrington, WAPA's current chief operating officer, will serve as acting executive director as the WAPA board searches for a replacement, which Mr. Mapp said was already being negotiated, although he did not say with whom.

While the governor did not give any specific reason as to why Mr. Rhymer was being transferred to OMB aside from his expertise in finance, the governor did say that he was not satisfied with the "culture" at WAPA.

"There's a culture in WAPA that we have to break," the governor said. "We really want to get to a modern electrical system... some more folks in there will have to come out." Mr. Mapp said he was not sure that WAPA employees who work hard and are deserving of promotions were being rewarded for their dedication, and he expressed the same skepticism for credentialed residents applying for work at the utility.

There's a letter that has been circulating on social media said to be from WAPA employees calling for the WAPA board to remove Mr. Rhymer for a myriad of reasons, among them favoritism, brash treatment of employees and an exodus of top WAPA employees who have left or are leaving the company, the letter suggests, because of Mr. Rhymer. None of the allegations have been confirmed to be true, however, and the governor reaffirmed his confidence in Mr. Rhymer at the press briefing.

"Mr. Rhymer has my confidence and respect. If he did not, I would not invite him to my cabinet," the governor said.

Though the territory's leader did not excoriate Mr. Rhymer, he suggested that WAPA may not be the right fit for him at the utility's current juncture. "In this time we are driven by some very powerful dates and deadlines... and we really believe that Julio's service to the community will be better experienced in his field," the governor said, referring to Mr. Rhymer's background in finance.

The governor hinted that the federal government may be leaning towards providing the funding to harden the territory's power distribution system by placing it underground. He said finding a professional outside of WAPA to run the utility may be the best path forward. "It will really be a good fit for his skillset and all to the betterment of the Virgin Islands," Mr. Mapp said.

Feature Image: Julio Rhymer at a WAPA board meeting earlier this year. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)