

The Virgin Islands Consortium

An Open Letter To Governor Mapp, viNGN And All Communication Carriers And ISPs

Opinion / **Published On April 17, 2018 10:33 AM /**

Staff **April 17, 2018**



Dear Governor Mapp, Mr. McGibbon, and others concerned:

It has been stunning how little is understood about the devastating and ongoing impact of Hurricane Irma on communications in parts of St. John, given the content of recent press releases. In Coral Bay, East End, Fish Bay, South side – anywhere without direct line of sight to St. Thomas – we lost every form of ordinary communication in Hurricane Irma: No landline telephone, no TV, no cell phone, no internet. And absolutely none of those commercial vendors recovered their systems at all until mid-December and January. VINGN's fiber network and VIYA's network were wires on poles that got completely knocked down by the winds. Emergency Satellite phone and internet worked poorly &

expensively, and while grateful to have something, this doesn't let people get on with their lives of rebuilding. Cell 7 data service did come in internationally in some spots from the British Virgin Islands beginning just days after the storm. Why did the BVI still have service – when we lost all carriers? Broadband VI, which initially promised to get back on line quickly, was completely stopped by the damages to their main facilities and customers on St. Croix. Our smaller population market size on St. John was clearly a lower priority after restoring other areas.

But there was one source of communication that came to St. John quickly and to Coral Bay by early October – a trickle of internet for people gathered around the wreck of the fire station and ultimately improved free internet service installed by supportive nonprofits such as Love City Community Network (LCCN). This lifeline was bounced first by satellite and then from repeater to repeater using solar power to get it to Coral Bay and more of the island. Even today people from East End and other areas with no internet service still come and sit in their cars near the site --donated graciously by our landlord--to communicate with the world on internet – and be in range of the smaller, shorter, still temporary AT&T cell tower. Broadband VI also uses the new shorter cell tower as their central serving location, and they have another broadcasting location. But due to our remoteness and hills, in the past many of our people were limited to the choice of landline phone service and wired internet –which will not be reaching us for many months according to VIYA's website (if ever again).

Indeed for a number of local residents, who do not have the \$1500+ upfront money to install a satellite dish system like Hughes Net, and internet phone service and devices, they have no possibility right now of phone or internet at their homes, (never mind cable TV). Many people are not in an actual reachable subscriber location for these services with any current ISP. Stopping the “free services” in Coral Bay or stopping LCCN from continuing further reduces residents' access to “lifeline” communications.

I do have faith that the commercial service providers will eventually provide most people with service – but that may be literally years away in some areas. But what about now? What about cost? VI NGN announced the month long re-connection of Love City Communications Network, with a blithe press release pointing to the webpage that shows 6 of their ISP vendors who service St. John. I have never heard of most of them, and since all, except Broadband VI, probably provide their service via line of sight from St. Thomas – they are likely only cherry-picking commercial installations in Cruz Bay. It is flat out wrong to say that St. John has service from multiple ISPs via VINGN. And where were they after the storms? They could have picked up existing and new customers on St. John, but their priorities were elsewhere, perhaps understandably. We have fewer customers spread out more geographically. This means we need different solutions – and forcing people to one existing ISP in certain areas is not the best resilient solution.

So the problem is much broader than allowing LCCN to be an ISP – we need a real list of multiple vendors for each location. We need to identify and serve underserved locations with affordable internet and “lifeline” emergency telephone communications NOW – not letting it happen after the commercial ventures connect all the profitable customers. There is also a federal mandate to provide “lifeline” communications and “universal service” that seems to be overlooked right now. Please bring it back to the forefront in our recovery.

I fully agree that LCCN should pay the same price for service from VINGN for its end-user services that other ISP vendors do, and pay the appropriate taxes. A nonprofit corporation can do this legally.

And why should we need to give up a vendor who was there for us – when other vendors were not?

Why should VI NGN terminate the free public service? At the rate we are going, some residents will not be served for months and years by traditional vendors. This cut-off is a step backwards in getting on with their lives. It is not acceptable to announce that the VI NGN Public Computer Center in the Library in Cruz Bay, open weekdays, except for lunch hour, is all the free service that is needed for St. John. People need to do personal business on the internet after working hours. People need to be able to call for police, fire and ambulances 24/7 – wherever they are. All the people who live on the eastern side of St. John need to have communications, not just those who can afford expensive installations or live in easily-served locations. The 24/7 free WiFi internet location in Coral Bay should not be disconnected – it is the “lifeline” now for those who cannot afford the more expensive alternatives. Remember, in Coral Bay, we also lost every public building and all communications means.

Redundancy – more than one option – is key to resilience and recovery and reducing stress.

A broader focus on needs and service is needed now – by all leaders in communications here in the VI.

This letter submitted to The Consortium on Monday by Sharon Coldren, president of the Coral Bay Council.