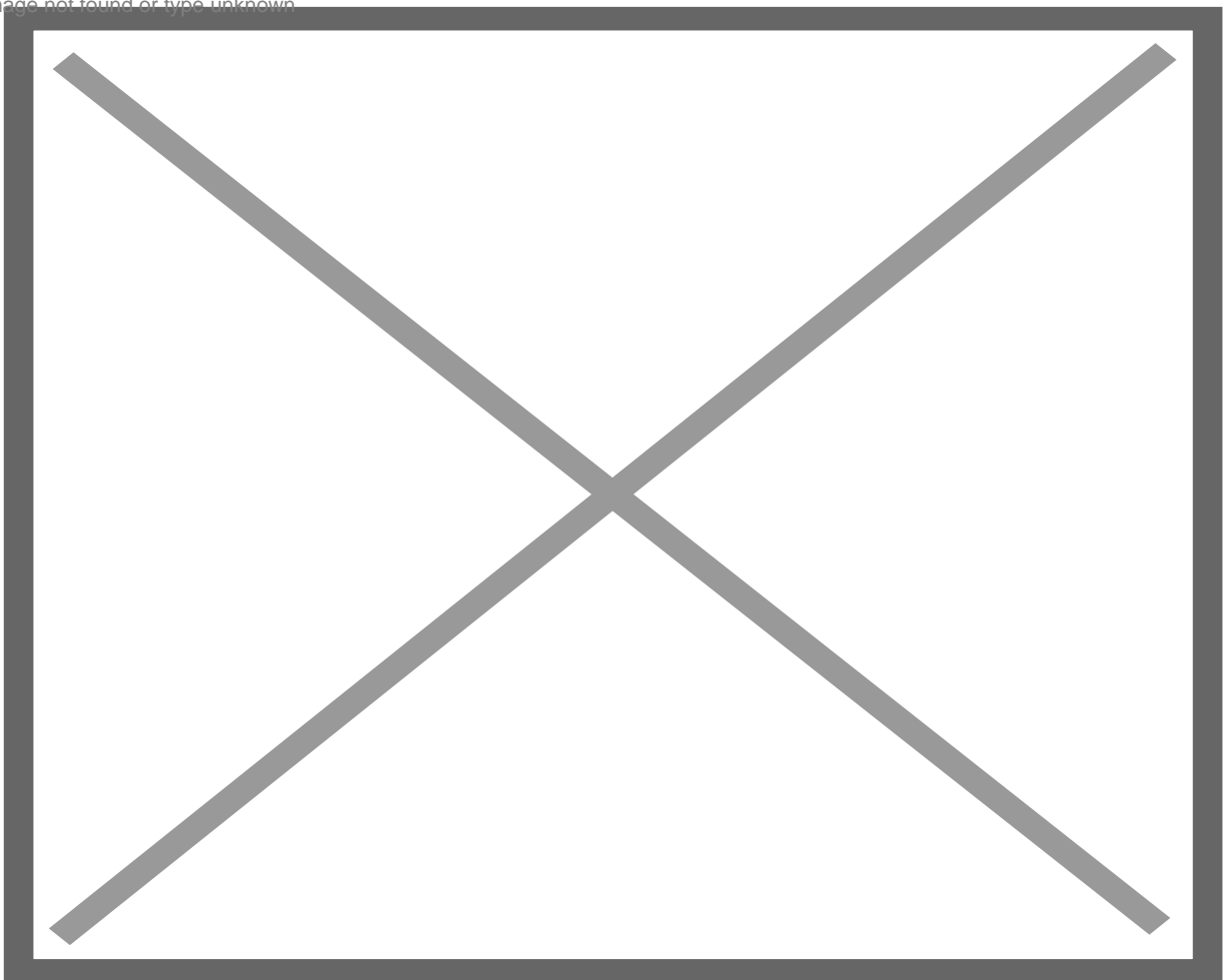


## Five Bills Forwarded to Rules Committee Including Measure to Create Ratepayers 'Bill of Rights', and Measure to Prevent Price Gouging During State of Emergency Declaration

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Lawmakers met at the Earl B. Ottley Legislature on Friday and took action on a number of measures, among them a bill that seeks to create a ratepayers "Bill of Rights" whose purpose is to increase ratepayers' involvement, as well as to provide more information before actions are taken relative to WAPA rate increases.

"We are trying to ensure that there is a codified procedure that protects you as a ratepayer as it relates to the services you receive from public utilities," said Senator Alicia Barnes, the bill's chief sponsor and chair of the Committee on Government Operations, Consumer Affairs, Energy,

Environment & Planning, in which yesterday's bills were heard before being forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting. "We are delineating a course of action and redress that you can take when you feel that your rights are being infringed upon or violated."

WAPA CEO Lawrence Kupfer had a number of concerns with the measure and called for amendments. One of the requested changes WAPA sought was a change to the requirement that would see WAPA providing customers a copy of its "proposal" for rates in billing statements before the proposal is submitted to the PSC, and then publish the petition in a newspaper of general circulation.

Mr. Kupfer contended a number of issues with this portion of the measure. "We do not believe the Bill contemplated the volume of information contained in petitions for a base rate adjustment and/or LEAC filings, nor do we hope the intent was to provide that level of detail to the customers," Mr. Kupfer said. "If we were to proceed with the Bill as written, VIWAPA's billing software cannot accommodate sending hundreds of pages of a typical LEAC and/or base rate petition as part of a customer bill. Also, to publish the actual base rate and LEAC petitions in the newspaper would not only be expensive, but the petition alone would be 50 or more times greater than the number of pages of the newspaper itself. WAPA recommends changes to this section and requests that the Bill be amended to require that a summary of the impact of the rate relief to its residential, commercial and large power customers, rather than a copy of the actual filing, be provided to each customer based on customer classification. The Authority proposes a copy of the actual filed petition be posted on the WAPA website." Mr. Kupfer's full testimony on the bill is [here](#).

Other measures approved include the following:

Bill No. 33-0198, which seeks to amend title 14, chapter 7, section 192 of the Virgin Islands Code by increasing the penalty for the illegal importation of snakes and imposing penalties. Testimony for Bill No. 22-0198 was previously received during a March 2, 2020 committee meeting.

The measure was introduced as a preventative action to protect the ecosystem and educate people on the harms of importing illegal species. Ms. Barnes commended the sponsor and said the measure will help prevent imbalances in the ecosystem and protect the delicate balance of the flora and fauna. Ms. Barnes wrote to DPNR in 2019 specifically requesting an invasive species eradication plan, as well as an update on the department's efforts to address this issue.

Bill No. 33-0115, sponsored by Kurt A. Vialet, which seeks to amend title 24, chapter 14 of the Virgin Islands Code by inserting a new section 384 relating to the transfer of the Virgin Islands Labor Management Committee as a division within the Public Employees' Relations Board. Senators were in support of the proposed merger, stating that it is a win-win for government employees as it seeks to streamline operations. Testimony for Bill No. 33-0115 was also previously received during a March 2, 2020 hearing.

Bill No. 33-0325, sponsored by Ms. Barnes, seeks to amend title 23, chapter 10, subchapter 1 of the Virgin Islands code relating to emergencies and major disasters by adding a section 1017 to prohibit unconscionable pricing of goods and services during a declaration of a state of emergency.

Department of Licensing & Consumer Affairs Commissioner Richard Evangelista said DLCA is in support of the measure as the proposed legislation seeks to protect the consumers.

Senator Javan James, Sr. asked if any firm has been penalized during COVID-19 pandemic. Evangelista, who was accompanied by Director Miguel Tricoche and Attorney Ann O'Neill, said the department has investigated 7 violations since the pandemic, but no citations were administered as invoices were checked and no price gouging was found. Mr. Evangelista said DLCA as of Friday had one active case concerning an aerosol disinfectant that has gained local attention on social media.

Bill No. 33-0111, sponsored by Senate President Novelle Francis, seeks to amend title 19, part VI of the Virgin Islands Code by adding a new chapter 56b, requiring that the Waste Management Authority designate disposal sites throughout the territory for waste tires, and creating the Waste Tire Management and Disposal Fund.

Mr. Francis said the bill is committed to reducing the number of tires in the community as the territory continues to see hundreds of tires improperly discarded throughout our roadways. The Waste Management Authority's Interim Executive Director, Ann Hanley provided testimony in support of the bill, and defined waste tires as those that are not suitable for use. Ms. Hanley said as the authority is mandated to designate Tire Transfer Stations, the WMA requested supplemental funding for site construction, loading equipment, etc.

Jennifer Valiulis testified on behalf of the St. Croix Environment Association and explained the toxic effects of the tires in the environment as they contain heavy metals and chemicals that are released as old tires begin to decompose. In addition to being the source of a breeding ground for mosquitos and rodents, waste tires can also provide shelter for red-tailed boas. Enrique Rodriguez of Rodriguez Auto Parts in St. Thomas also testified on the measure.