

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Senate Hearing, WAPA Executive Director Appears To Confirm Mapp's Promise Of 50 Percent Reduction In Power Bills

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ST. THOMAS -- During a Senate hearing in the Committee on Government Affairs, Veterans, Energy and Environmental Protection here on Friday, where senators received testimony from Virgin Islands Water and Power representatives, the authority's Executive Director Lawrence J. Kupfer, appeared to confirm Governor Kenneth Mapp's promise of 50 percent reduction in power bills. Although Mr. Kupfer didn't give a timeline to corroborate Mr. Mapp's 12 to 18 months estimate for the drastic savings, the executive director did say that following the federal government's \$625 million funding to WAPA to be used for modernization, the authority should see a 50 percent reduction in fuel cost --

leading to roughly a 50 percent trimming of their electric bills. Mr. Kupfer was responding to a related question posed by outgoing Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly.

Mr. Kupfer's testimony syncs with Mr. Mapp's [lofty words during a campaign launch event on St. Croix](#). "We are telling you without dispute that in another year to 18 months, your power bill will come down by half," the governor proclaimed. Mr. Mapp said he did not make the remark based on politics, "But because \$572 million have been set aside for the modernization of the Water and Power Authority. New generating systems, wind-produced power, more solar, lines underground.

"My friends the point that I want to make here is that we're focusing on our recovery, we're focusing on the expansion of our economy, we're focusing on the creation of jobs," Mr. Mapp added.

According to Mr. Kupfer, out of the \$625 million provided by the federal government, \$440 million has been set aside for underground transmission, distribution and drops directly to customers' meters. Upon completion, an estimated 50 percent of customers will have underground power from distribution feeders directly to the meters. To date, underground projects completed include the territory's towns -- among them Charlotte Amalie, Red Hook, Cruz Bay in St. John and Christiansted and Frederiksted on St. Croix, according to Mr. Kupfer.

Giving Hurricanes Irma and Maria-related updates, the executive director said WAPA's transmission and distribution system, the electrical grid and 90 percent of the authority's infrastructure received extensive damage. He said WAPA, however, was able to restore power to 90 percent of homes territory-wide by December.

"The storms caused significant damages to our automated metering infrastructure, thereby preventing the authority from billing in the months immediately after the hurricanes," Mr. Kupfer said.

Relative to electric billing following the 2017 hurricanes, which residents have complained about as being unfair, Mr. Kupfer told lawmakers that the first batch of electric bills mailed to customers following the storms was for the month of August. He said the following bills were a combination of September 2017 to January 2018. Mr. Kupfer, responding to questions posed by Senators Sammuel Sanes and Tregenza Roach relative to the method used to bill residents even as all metering systems were down, said, "The estimation of the current bills is based on the customer's usage from May 2017 to July 2017. WAPA then issued a one-time bill to customers for the first five months after the hurricanes."

Residents have reached out to The Consortium complaining about what they've concluded have been unfair billing practices by WAPA. Some said they've received bills totaling thousands of dollars, and were confused as to the method used by the authority -- but wound up paying nonetheless, wary of a protracted back and forth with the authority.