

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WAPA Considers 'Floating Hotels' To House Relief Workers In Aftermath Of Major Storm

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The main focus at WAPA's emergency board meeting on Thursday was hurricane preparedness and prompt post-hurricane response in the event of a major storm. Also discussed on the agenda was the procurement of ships, called floating hotels, to house off-island relief crews to help relieve the housing shortage that occurs after a natural disaster.

The authority's leadership said it was inspired to source floating hotels -- to be provided by Landry & Kling Global Cruise Events-- after FEMA utilized cruise ships in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 to house displaced residents. The boats will vary in size, but each are fully outfitted with all the comforts of a home, including

electricity, showers, laundry, and internet service, and are ADA compliant to accommodate individuals with disabilities.

The floating hotel option is a step towards alleviating the housing shortage residents and visitors alike experienced after the 2017 storms left many unable to afford rental units as limited supply and high demand caused rental costs to skyrocket.

Since FEMA was first to house residents aboard the cruise ships in the Virgin Islands after a disaster, WAPA decided to utilize the federal agency's cost-fitting measures to determine the daily expense for the floating hotel. According to WAPA executives, FEMA was paid \$275 per person per day. WAPA intends to pay anywhere from \$194 per person per day for an average of 90 days, to \$310 per person per day for an average of 30 days.

The authority said it is committed to being adequately prepared to handle the challenges that rebuilding poses after a natural disaster, and ensuring that workers have ample housing is a part of that plan. "As we approach the peak of the hurricane season, WAPA is better positioning itself to engage services such as supplies, emergency housing, and damage assessment should the territory be adversely affected by a windstorm event or even, a man-made catastrophic incident," said Lawrence J. Kupfer, WAPA executive director and CEO.

The utility's evaluation team has been sourcing qualified emergency responders and has several pending proposal bids to consider. Contract negotiations and execution with bidding companies to provide the manpower and supplies to successfully restore electricity and water after a storm, are currently in the works. Favorable action by WAPA's governing board Thursday paved the way for damage assessment services, emergency housing, and equipment and supplies for restoration efforts.

For the second time in the last few months the governing board tabled a measure involving Series 2003 Bond Ambac refunding aimed at providing funding to pay down the outstanding obligation WAPA owes Wartsila. However, the board voted unanimously on the other action items to authorize Mr. Kupfer:

- To negotiate and execute contracts with Haugland Energy Group and BHI Energy to ensure immediate, safe, effective, and competent assessment of damage to WAPA's electric grids in the aftermath of severe weather events.
- To negotiate and execute contracts with Landry & Kling Global Cruise Events to provide emergency boat housing accommodations for off- island crews during restoration efforts.
- To negotiate and execute contracts with two V.I. electrical contractors and two off-island contractors regarding the availability of resources needed to ensure swift restoration of future storm damage to WAPA's electric grids. The V.I.-based contractors are: Fortress Electric, and Bonneville Contracting and Technology Group. The off-island contractors are BBC Electric, and Haugland Energy Group.

Board members in attendance included Noel Loftus, vice chairman, Juanita Young, secretary, Anthony D. Thomas, chairman, Gerald T. Groner, Esq., Hubert Turnbull, and Cheryl Boynes Jackson.

Feature Image: St. Croix residents and some tourists stuck on the island following Hurricane Maria in 2017, prepare to board a cruise ship headed to Florida free of charge. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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