

# The Virgin Islands Consortium

## Telecom Companies In Senate Hot Seat During Hearing

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Regional executives from the telecommunications giants servicing the territory were under the microscope Friday, answering V.I. lawmakers' pointed questions about the cellular service providers' post-Irma and Maria performance and plans going forward into the current hurricane season.

Corporate officers from AT&T, Sprint/ Boost Mobile (operating locally and in Puerto Rico as PR Wireless) flew in from Puerto Rico to testify before the Virgin Islands Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications. Jennifer Matarangas-King, the St. Croix-based vice president of public relations and governmental affairs, representing Viya, was notable because she was the only locally based telecom executive on hand.

Two years after Hurricanes Irma and Maria plunged the territory into darkness and cut off communications with much of the outside world for days, some of the company executives were clearly unprepared to answer questions:

## **AT&T**

Sen. Javan James pressed AT&T representatives. "You spent \$11 million since Hurricanes Irma and Maira... Can you specify where the bulk of you monies went to?"

"I cannot give you exact numbers. But I can tell you the money went to boost the network, ... AT&T is going to build out additional infrastructure. That infrastructure is done to better the current and, again, to boost speeds, performance. A lot of money went to rebuilding the damage that was caused by the hurricanes. Lets all remember that there were two hurricanes and they were very powerful."

Community engagement is key, said Sen. Alicia Barnes. "Do you have a community engagement plan as it relates to your being a corporate citizen in the United States Virgin Islands?"

Salvatore Casale, area director of legislative and external affairs for AT&T of P.R. and the V.I., hesitated. "We do participate. We are very involved in the Virgin Islands community. AT&T has made some donations for science, technology and math. STEM programs. ... Right now, I don't have the full information and detail for that program."

Mr. Cassale said AT&T has operated in the territory for more than 20 years, but he was unsure where dollars were spent, such as whether public or private schools were beneficiaries, or how much was spent.

Since the 2017 hurricanes, AT&T has spent more than \$11 million to boost speeds and bandwidth, Mr. Casale said. AT&T has 23 cell sites on towers throughout the territory. Mr. Casale did not know off-hand how those sites were distributed through the islands.

AT&T also has the largest base of cellular customers in the territory.

## **VIYA**

Mrs. Matarangas-King said Viya maintains 25 cell sites on St. Thomas (with a 26th coming); 13 sites on St. Croix and five on St. John (with a sixth coming in the next two weeks).

Hurricane Irma took approximately 39 percent of wireless sites out of service. Two weeks later, Maria knocked out another 29 percent of tower sites. "Within four months, by January of 2018, over 80 percent of our wireless network was back in service and we launched a new wireless network 4G," Mrs. Matarangas-King said. "VIYA stayed in the trenches and in the community. We live here. We are involved, we are engaged. The VI needed us, and we stayed focused on keeping the territory connected."

Sen. Barnes called Viya "a shining example of good corporate engagement." Although she had some concerns, Viya, Ms. Barnes added, "seems to have a good path forward."

## **Sprint/ Boost Mobile**

Sen. Stedmann Hodge Jr. complimented VIYA and AT&T for their ability to keep service largely in place in the immediate aftermath of Irma and Maria. "Sprint – and I've been a Sprint customer since 2003 – with Sprint, there was no service available," he said.

Indeed, Sprint's cellular service stayed down the longest following the 2017 storms, and the carrier lost a wide swath of its customers to AT&T the months that followed.

Mr. Hodge added, "If another disaster comes, I can go to Viya and get to my hotspot (free wireless areas around the islands). AT&T, I can get my GoPhone. What does Sprint have to offer? At this point, nothing, really."

Like the other networks, Sprint said it would continue working on its service with additional infrastructure improvements.