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WAPA's \$3 Million Gutterball Deal

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WAPA's \$500,000-a-year abandoned bowling alley in Bolongo Bay, St. Thomas. A cottage and parking are included in the rent. By. Robert Moore for VI Consortium.

Over the past year, the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) has leased an abandoned bowling alley, a tiny cottage and the surrounding parking lot for a staggering \$500,000.04 per year. For WAPA ratepayers keeping track of the news, this is somewhat common knowledge.

However, ratepayers may not have heard that a longtime WAPA contractor and his wife are the landlords of the property on the receiving end of this sweet, multi-year deal.

WAPA has leased the dilapidated bowling alley, a small cottage and an unkempt parking lot at the bottom of Donkey Hill on St. Thomas for a staggering \$41,666 per month, or \$500,000 annually.

A three-year lease that began in September 2018 has an option for an additional three years, potentially leaving ratepayers on the hook for \$3 million if the lease is fully exercised.

For more than 20 years, the VI Christian Ministries Inc. has been a well-known and respected part of the St. Thomas religious community. Church President and Pastor Adele Penn-Brown has been a fixture on local Sunday morning radio.

Audain Brown, the pastor's husband and vice president of the ministry, is a fixture on WAPA's payroll. Mr. Brown's day job is President of Fortress Electrical Contracting Corp., one of the power authority's go-to vendors on major line projects across the territory.

In an email to the Consortium, WAPA spokesman Jean Greaux said the authority is leasing 13,395 square feet of office space from the church. The office space would include the abandoned bowling alley – which remains abandoned – and an adjacent cottage, which has lights and appears to be used as work-space.

Mr. Greaux said the office and another 24,500 square feet of outdoor space is now the authority's Line Department. He said rental costs and development of “... the permanent location for the Line Department ...” is eligible for reimbursement by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The Line Department's previous office space and staging area at the Randolph Harley Power Plant on St. Thomas was destroyed in Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

The Consortium reached out to Mr. Brown for comment. Pastor Brown answered a phone number found for Fortress Electrical. She said that the VI Christian Ministries Inc. and Fortress Electrical Contracting Corp. are separate entities, and only the church was involved in the WAPA lease.

She declined to comment any further.

While Mr. Greaux responded to the Consortium's request for information, WAPA's executive suite apparently had no interest in responding to Virgin Islands lawmakers inquiries.

Virgin Islands Senator Kenneth Gittens said lawmakers were forced to issue subpoenas to WAPA for records regarding “... all contracts and leases entered into by the utility.”

Mr. Gittens said the bowling alley lease was of particular concern. In a letter to WAPA Executive Director Lawrence Kupfer, Gittens asked what steps have been taken to review, modify or terminate the rental contracts.

As of late October, Mr. Gittens said he had not received a response.

In August 2018 – one month before the lease between WAPA and the church was struck – the WAPA Governing Board approved a \$400,720 contract with Mr. Brown's Fortress Electrical to replace damaged low voltage switchgear at the Richmond Power Plant on St. Croix. The contract contained provisions for a 15 percent contingency to cover the cost of any unexpected overruns.

The relationship between WAPA and Fortress goes back many years. Consider:

- In 2012, the WAPA board approved a contract with Fortress Electrical Contracting for \$440,000 to install and terminate underground materials and equipment for the Main Street hazard mitigation project with a new feeder out of the Long Bay substation on St. Thomas.

- In 2006, Fortress Electrical installed electrical cables into conduits on the Melvin H. Evans Highway on St. Croix. The contract cost was unclear.
- In 2004, Virgin Islands media outlets reported that Mr. Brown was present for “integrity tests” of electrical cables between St. Thomas and St. John. Fortress Electrical was involved in the \$3.2 million project at the time to lay under-sea cables from St. Thomas to Little St. James and St. John islands.

Depending on their size, nonprofit organizations, including churches, submit publicly available tax returns to the federal government. Those with less than \$25,000 in revenue annual have no obligation to file openly.

A review of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service database of tax-exempt organizations turned up 777 nonprofits in the Virgin Islands, dozens of St. Thomas churches among them.

The VI Christian Ministries was not one of them. It is unclear why.

501c3Lookup.org, a widely used New York-based company that provides online information about 501c3 non-profits does, however, list the church as a not-for-profit religious entity in the territory.

According to the 501c3Lookup.org database, the VI Christian Ministries lists assets of between \$1 million and \$4.9 million.