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WAPA Leadership Shakeup Takes Hold as Rhymer Resigns and Hedrington is Set to Leave; Kupfer, Whose Planned Exit Was March 10, Has Gone on Leave Through His Last Day

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WAPA's Christiansted power plant By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

A shakeup of the leadership of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority that has long been called for by elected officials and members of the public appears to be taking hold at the territory's only electric and water utility.

Following last week's resignation of Executive Director / CEO Lawrence Kupfer, after a three-year run at the helm of the company, VI Consortium has learned that a controversial figure at the Authority, Gregory Rhymer, suddenly retired last week, and the head of the electric system,

Clinton Hedrington, is also set to retire, exiting before the end of this month.

In what has been a whirlwind of activity over the past couple of weeks, with frequent meetings by the utility's board of governors, and reported differences between Mr. Kupfer and the board, the changes are becoming somewhat clearer.

While WAPA's Director of Communications Jean Greaux, Jr. has repeatedly declined to comment, saying he is not authorized to comment on personnel matters of the authority, several sources in and out of WAPA have confirmed the rapidly developing changes.

Mr. Kupfer, who originally planned a 90-day transition period when his contract expired on February 28, resigned a little over a week ago, setting March 10 as his final date. Last week, Mr. Kupfer reportedly went on leave through his last day.

Mr. Rhymer, a controversial figure at WAPA over the years, submitted retirement papers and quietly exited WAPA last week. He was most recently a special advisor to Mr. Kupfer, earning well over \$150,000 a year.

Rhymer had become a target of WAPA's governing board which reportedly instructed Kupfer in January to have allegations of corruption and malfeasance against him thoroughly investigated. In February, seven of nine board members voted to defund Mr. Rhymer's position, effectively terminating him. His retirement followed days later.

Also parting ways with the authority is the chief operating officer of the electric system. Mr. Hedrington, a well-regarded electrical engineer and industry rising star, was set to retire in December 2020, and delayed his departure until this month. Mr. Hedrington is credited with revamping the electric system and pursuing projects in recent years to modernize the generation, transmission, and distribution systems of the authority. He played a key role in the system's restoration following the 2017 hurricanes and has been instrumental in developing federally funded mitigation projects to rebuild a more resilient electric grid.

The most recent leadership changes follow the 2020 resignation of General Counsel Lorelei Farrington, who is now a staff attorney at the V.I. Public Finance Authority, and Chief Administrative Officer Rupert Pelle. Mr. Pelle [has filed suit](#) against WAPA naming Kupfer, Rhymer, and Human Resources Director Sabrina King Leonce as conspiring to bring unfounded allegations of poor job performance against him in a move to have him disciplined and terminated. Mr. Pelle is represented by St. Croix attorney Lee Rohn.

WAPA also made headlines a few weeks ago when another director, Niel Vanterpool, [was named in a criminal information](#) filed by V.I. Justice Department. The complaint alleged instances of violations of the territory's conflict of interest laws during business dealings between Mr. Vanterpool, a WAPA contractor, and a sub-contractor which Mr. Vanterpool is said to have held an ownership interest in.

While six of nine governing board members are nominated by the governor and confirmed by the Senate, current and past governors have found it necessary to inject themselves into the day-to-day operations of WAPA.

During the 2018 political campaign, then Governor Kenneth Mapp on more than one occasion referred to "a culture" in WAPA. He said the culture needed to change if the company was to prosper.

Mr. Mapp's predecessor, John de Jongh, Jr. was, by comparison, a huge supporter of WAPA. Under de Jongh's administration, native son Hugo Hodge, Jr. was returned to the territory to lead WAPA. During his eight years in office, Mr. de Jongh remained a consistent and vibrant defender of WAPA including its controversial propane conversion project which doubled in cost from \$80 million to more than \$167 million.

Mr. Rhymer, one of de Jongh's closely aligned political allies, was one of the propane project managers. In appearances before the Senate and Public Services Commission, which sets WAPA's rates, Mr. Rhymer has vociferously defended the project and gone head to head with critics of the project's cost overruns. On one occasion, Mr. Rhymer verbally sparred with then Sen. Oakland Benta during a Senate hearing in the 33rd Legislature over allegations of corruption that had been rumored about Mr. Rhymer during his years at WAPA.

Governor Albert Bryan has spent much of his three years in office defending WAPA, consistently issuing rallying calls to the public and other elected officials to support the utility's initiatives. In 2020, Mr. Bryan provided more than \$15 million in CARES Act funding to WAPA, allowing the company to issue one-time credits to its electrical customers to ease the pain of having received 60-day bills the month before. Mr. Bryan has also met with the board frequently, reportedly as recent as last week, encouraging members to support the direction WAPA's management is leading the company.

Current WAPA board members include Chairman and Property and Procurement Commissioner Anthony D. Thomas, Vice Chairman Jed JohnHope, Secretary Juanita Young, BIR Director Joel Lee, Energy Office Director Kyle Fleming, Cheryl Boynes Jackson, Noel Loftus, Hubert Turnbull, and Elizabeth Armstrong.

Thomas, Fleming, and Lee are members of the governor's cabinet while Jackson, Young, and Loftus remain serving years after their terms have expired.

While the governing board will likely announce an interim executive director from within its ranks to replace Mr. Kupfer, it is likely a search will be launched to identify a permanent replacement for not only the executive director but the head of the electrical system, and a chief financial officer. A new CFO was expected in the latter part of 2020 but he was a no-show on his first day. Debra Gottlieb, CFO since 2018, continues to serve as acting chief financial officer.

As the governing board members assemble a new leadership team at WAPA, residents continue to dole out more than 40 cents per kilowatt hour in electrical rates. WAPA remains beleaguered by an unreliable power system, a dysfunctional billing system and an often-criticized customer service division whose representatives have been described in many corners of the community as unprofessional, belligerent with customers and, at times, outright rude.

The hit and miss power system usually experience frequent power outages in one or both districts several times a week. One such outage occurred on St. Croix Friday. Eight electrical feeders fell off-line around midday leaving almost 20,000 customers across the island in darkness. The outage resulted from reported generation capacity loss at the Estate Richmond Power Plant, the cause of which has not been explained to the inconvenienced ratepayers.

