

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Committee of the Whole Summons WAPA Board Members, PSC Commissioners to Hearing on WAPA Audit Findings

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The Committee of the Whole hearing set for Tuesday will include members of the V.I. Water and Power Authority Governing Board and Public Services Commission commissioners, according to a notice issued by the Office of Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory.

The meeting, convening at 10:00 a.m., will include two blocks:

Block I

- Internal Audit Findings and Reports to include corrective measures from 2014 to present
- Actions taken by the Governing Board of WAPA and the Authority from 2014 to present as a result of the Internal Audit Findings
- Explanation and application of the base rate, OPEB and PILOT surcharge

Block II will include discussions on proposed legislation related to WAPA and the PSC previously approved in the 33rd Legislature but vetoed by Governor Albert Bryan. They include the following:

- WAPA board composition
- PSC board composition
- PSC increased regulatory and oversight authority

The hearing follows [the Consortium's article](#) on a letter from vice chairman of WAPA's governing board, Jed JohnHope addressed to board chairman Anthony Thomas, which also included a 2014 audit of WAPA. The audit revealed shocking allegations against longtime WAPA top tier employee, Gregory Rhymer, including allegations of bribery, with the audit alleging that Mr. Rhymer would solicit money from owners of companies who were either performing work or sought work from WAPA. Those who did not comply would be punished, the audit says.

In the audit, a contractor was allegedly advised not to give Mr. Rhymer money because doing so would be like "signing a pack with the devil."

On Thursday during an interview with the Consortium, Ms. Frett-Gregory expressed considerable concern that even after hosting numerous Committee of the Whole hearings to probe WAPA officials, the authority said nothing of the audit, which was performed beginning in 2014 and forwarded to the Office of the Attorney General, Denise George, in 2019.

"In all the discussions we've had with WAPA, it never ever came out that there was an internal audit, and in fact the details of the audit was sent to the attorney general. I was definitely taken aback by that," Ms. Frett-Gregory said. She pointed to the 33rd Legislature's efforts through hearings and legislation that were vetoed by Governor Albert Bryan. "None of that came out," she repeated, stunned that the audit had remained hidden from the public for so long. "There is no way that that audit should not have come out based on all the questions that we asked."

She added, "We moved in the 33rd Legislature significant legislation to address the issues with WAPA, and of course you are aware that they were vetoed, particularly legislation that myself and Senator Sarauw spent a lot of time on. Senator Vialet came in after a while and worked with us on it as well," Ms. Frett-Gregory said, referring to legislation that sought to provide WAPA with outside oversight, which was vetoed — along with another measure aimed at bettering the utility and holding it accountable — by Mr. Bryan.

The Senate president went on to describe the audit's findings as a dark day in the Virgin Islands, while vowing to continue working on legislation that would see outside help taking hold at WAPA.

Ms. Sarauw chided Mr. Bryan for constantly vetoing legislation aimed at reigning in the authority. "The governor inherited much of WAPA's issues. However, every attempt to chart a new course was intercepted by the governor. WAPA cannot continue to be coddled. Sweeping changes must be made for the sake of this Territory," she said.

Senator Kurt Violet had similar sentiments, stating that individuals such as Rupert Pelle, [the whistleblower](#) who held a number of positions during his years at WAPA beginning in 2000, should be invited to testify.

Senator Kenneth Gittens also shared outrage at the audit and its concealment for so long, and said he would introduce legislation that would authorize the hiring of an outside private investigator to probe WAPA.

"The allegations that are reported are very serious allegations which require close scrutiny. We can't overlook the numerous troubling issues at the Water and Power Authority, and this recent article, though it doesn't touch on [the more than \\$2 million that was sent offshore](#), we still have to keep that at the forefronts of our mind," Mr. Gittens said. He, as other senators, said the Legislature made attempts to impose greater controls at the authority, "but under the circumstances, I am also reviewing a new course of action in terms of possibly legislating the appointment of a special investigator or a special prosecutor," he added. Mr. Gittens also said he has resubmitted legislation that would make sure, among other things, that the WAPA board as well as the Public Services Commission, which regulates WAPA, has subject matter experts serving.

The Committee of the Whole hearing will be carried live on the Consortium's website and Facebook platform, as well as the Legislature's Facebook platform.