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WAPA to Petition PSC For Rate Increase in April Resulting in Minimum \$8.23 Per Month in Additional Charge For Average Ratepayer

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Senator Kenneth Gittens on Tuesday held up handcuffs while addressing V.I. Water and Power Authority officials and governing board members. By. CHAUNTE HERBERT, LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS.

The Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority will seek an electric rate increase authorization from the Public Services Commission that, if approved, will see the average customer's monthly bill climb by \$8.23 minimum, with customers using more than 400 kilowatt hour per month seeing higher charges. WAPA will seek the proposed surcharge in April.

The surcharge increase petition was shared by WAPA Board Chairman Anthony Thomas during an all-day Committee of the Whole hearing Tuesday, which was called as a result of a Consortium story on an internal WAPA audit that laid bare [damnatory accusations](#) against longtime WAPA top tier employee, Gregory Rhymer, who [recently resigned](#) after the board [defunded his \\$150,000 special-advisor-to-the-CEO position](#).

Mr. Thomas said the increase is necessary to service WAPA's \$92 million Community Disaster Loan (CDL) debt provided to the territory by the Federal Emergency Management Agency following the passage of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

"The surcharge will allow the authority to collect the rates needed to pay for the debt service and associated costs for the CDL," Mr. Thomas said. The board chair said WAPA was reviewing its current expenses and future financial plans "to find ways to mitigate this cost rather than passing the cost to the ratepayer. We understand that currently, our community has been impacted by increased rates. Thus, we will continue to seek viable alternatives to the one proposed."

Senators throughout the day assailed executives of WAPA and some board members for the seemingly insurmountable problems that have accumulated over the years, leading to an authority that is in dire need of saving. Board Vice Chairman Jed JohnHope listed a myriad of issues facing the utility — from a questionable ethics record, unsustainable debt levels, operating with a negative cash balance, losing approximately \$1 million a week — among other serious and survival-threatening problems.

"The utility suffers from a lack of leadership and planning. The blunt and honest truth is that WAPA has been mismanaged for decades by previous administrations, previous incarnations of the PSC, previous Senates, and by its senior management," Mr. JohnHope said.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, holding up handcuffs, did not spare punches as he commenced his bloodletting. "Like the old saying goes, the chicken has come home to roost. As I sit here, again I'm sickened to my stomach with this WAPA issue. I sit here with the Virgin Islands Code Title 14, and wondering why only public corruption we could have seen thus far," he said. Holding up handcuffs, Mr. Gittens said he wished he had the power to utilize the arresting equipment to jail some WAPA officials.

PSC Executive Director Donald Cole had no appetite for another base rate increase. "For too long the authority has acted with casual disregard for the effects of its actions or inactions on ratepayers, and the bill for those decisions has always been passed on to the ratepayers, at great expense to the economy of the territory," he said. "The phrase that we have been hearing is that the Commission is punishing WAPA. That is not true; the Commission is just not punishing ratepayers..."