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WAPA Details Progress on Recovery Projects But Unable to Say if Electric Rates Would be Lowered as a Result

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Electric meter

The Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority on Thursday gave detailed testimony providing updates to the Committee of Disaster Recovery and Infrastructure on ongoing projects to improve the power grid in the Virgin Islands. However, the main concern among senators after the presentation was how would the completion of these projects affect the price of energy in the territory — a question WAPA was unable to answer.

WAPA's opening testimony was a collaborative effort led by Ashley Bryan, interim director of transmission and distribution, which provided updates on composite pole installations,

underground projects, advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) and other projects relative to building a more resilient power grid.

On St. Croix, where WAPA recently broke ground on an [undergrounding project](#), W.A.P.A. expects 83 percent of wood poles to be transitioned to underground lines. In St. Thomas, that figure is 82 percent. For the remaining power lines the traditional wood poles will be replaced by composite poles.

Denika Charles, mechanical engineer in WAPA's Project Management Division, stated the importance of composite poles as they "are more resilient to hurricane-force winds and were chosen to replace the territory's vulnerable wooden poles." She said composite poles can withstand winds of up to 200 mph and come with a 40-year guarantee.

On St. Croix, 1,453 of the composite poles out of a projected 4,003 poles have been installed; on St. Thomas 833 of a projected 2,333 have been installed; and on St. John 966 of a projected 1,960 poles have been installed.

While the presentation was very informative and senators spoke highly of the young engineers who participated, there were many concerns with the authority.

The burning question was initially asked by Senator Marvin Blyden. Directing his query to Ms. Bryan, Mr. Blyden said, "Today I am hearing good news in terms of WAPA and their progress on a number [of projects] that will significantly improve the efficiency and reliability of generation when it comes to power, so my question to Ms. Bryan, once these projects are completed will the ratepayers here in the territory experience any decrease in terms of their utility bill?"

Ms. Bryan explained that it is not the engineering department's responsibility to make rates, though the projects will make energy creation more efficient, effectively lowering operational cost while providing more reliable power. She added, "In saying that the costs are going to go down, we are saying operations are going to go down but realistically, our group does not make the rates so I can't make an overall promise to say when and if the ratepayers will receive a reduction in their rates. However, on an engineering standpoint everything will be more efficient so it should improve the operations of the authority."

Senator Janelle Sarauw later asked whether the bill of the average consumer was factored into the design of the renewable energy aspect of these projects. Ms. Bryan said, "I don't think there's been a rate calculation in terms of the renewables." She said the rate calculation would have to come afterward "to determine how much of the operational cost would be offset by the installation of these renewable energy resources."

Senator Samuel Carrion expressed similar sentiments, "It just draws down to the bottom line, the ratepayers paying less." He pointed to the cost of living in the territory which has been greatly affected by WAPA's exorbitantly high cost of energy.

"The only issue I have today is the fact that no one from the team can tell us what that reduction will look like. We are building the infrastructure, we are adding renewables but no one can really say what the numbers are, what the reduction will be, what's the saving of the pockets of the ratepayers," he said.

Senator Kurt Violet expressed disappointment in the progress of the AMI project as W.A.P.A. had to put out a new contract for a service that was already contracted out.

Chavante Marsh, an electrical engineer in WAPA's Project Management Division, said, "Although the authority has used internal staff and external consultants in a bid to repair the system, the results have not been as robust as anticipated."

In [March of 2020](#), Black & Veatch International was contracted for the first stage of system restoration at a cost of \$371,140.

The lack of a functioning AMI system causes a number of problems for WAPA, as the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development says WAPA must get bill guesstimating below two percent before disaster recovery funds through HUD are released. Office of Disaster Recovery Director, Adrienne Williams-Octalien, said while the local government was able to drawdown funding, a delay in the release of the funds had concerned a contractor and work was paused as a result. The matter has since been resolved, she said.

Another key point brought to the discussion by Mr. Vialet was his inquiry into what groundwork has been laid to include the Virgin Islands in President Joe Biden's national infrastructure plan to fund the water system. Mrs. Williams-Octalien said the plan is to be involved to "leverage any unmet needs." The deadline for inclusion is at the time of this month.

Mr. Vialet said, "We need a sense of urgency for this particular matter... We do know there is a need for the Virgin islands to specifically be included in that plan and if we don't submit the data that is necessary for submission we will be left out."

Later in the hearing, Mr. Vialet also pointed to a portion of the Biden infrastructure plan that calls for the replacement of copper pipes for drinking water, stating that the territory should be included.

"Have we and are we analyzing the St. Thomas system also to make sure we know where copper lines are, so we are able to come up with a replacement cost and submit that to be part of the upcoming infrastructure plan? Are we in the process to replace all copper pipes in the Virgin Islands?"

Don Gregoire, interim chief operating officer for water systems at WAPA, said the copper lines are not part of the main water distribution system. Those lines, he said, are ductlines, which Mr. Vialet stated provides similar water quality to copper lines. Mr. Gregoire said W.A.P.A's goal is to replace all those lines.