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Bryan Vows to Reduce WAPA Rates Before Term Ends, Defends Decision to Veto Bill Calling for Turnaround Company

WAPA / **Published On June 16, 2021 04:30 AM /**

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Governor Albert Bryan responds to questions Tuesday night during an hourlong interview with VI Consortium's Ernice Gilbert. By. VI CONSORTIUM

Governor Albert Bryan defended his record during an interview with the Consortium Tuesday evening streamed live on VIC platforms. Taking on the big topics, Consortium Publisher Ernice Gilbert pressed Mr. Bryan on a range on issues, including the big items such as the V.I. Water and Power Authority and the Gov't Employees' Retirement System. Mr. Bryan passionately defended his record and vowed to reduce WAPA electric rate before his first time ends.

"We are going to reduce the rates," the governor assured. "W.A.P.A. you are going to see the changes. We are going to get them done before the end of my first term."

Mr. Gilbert showed clips of past interviews with the governor, including one showing Mr. Bryan during a 2019 interview promising to deliver 7 to 8 cents per kilowatt hour decrease in rates no later than 2021. "After that it will continue to decline as we bring other products on," he added.

The reduction never came to fruition, and WAPA is now seeking a rate increase citing the rising cost of fuel.

After watching the clip, Mr. Bryan blamed the broken promise on Covid, stating that when WAPA sought to refinance in 2020 investors could not visit the territory to assess the plant. "They never got an opportunity to come because we were shutdown," he said.

On the topic of potential rate increases, Mr. Bryan said, "I saw W.A.P.A. with a rate increase but we are going to do our best to keep the light bill solid so people can survive... I'll definitely be working against it."

The governor also spoke of the reliability of the authority under his administration. "When I came to office the scream was not so much the rate but the reliability because St. Thomas was having power outages 2-3 times a week. I think people forget and you got to remind them of what was going on when we came into office. There were no street lights, there were no signs," he said.

About a year and a half before Mr. Bryan took office, Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated the territory, ravaging the islands' infrastructure and leading to months without electricity. WAPA's infrastructure suffered calamitous damage leading to a massive federal government push through FEMA.

Questioned on his seemingly full support of the authority's decisions while stifling efforts to rein in the authority — including by vetoing legislation that would have authorized a turnaround company to assess WAPA and recommend changes — the governor said there was no need for such action and that the measure came without funding. The bill also sought to enhance the Public Services Commission's function by giving the PSC regulatory oversight of WAPA and other utilities in the Virgin Islands. The governor also vetoed a measure that sought to establish a minimum criteria for WAPA's governing board. "The Legislature approved every single body that sits on that board except my designees, so they ultimately get to choose who gets to sit on the board," he contended.

The governor further stated, "The Legislature is desperate to take action against WAPA to make it seem like they are doing something." Asked by Mr. Gilbert whether he doubted the lawmakers' intentions, the governor said, "I think it's genuine to get votes, I don't think they really believe if you change the board you are going to change W.A.P.A."

He pointed out that WAPA had seen consecutive leadership change over several years. "Over the course of the last eight years they've changed board members. What really needs to happen is consistency and follow-through in terms of the plan... Leadership is what you need in terms of seeing a plan to fruition," he said.

Mr. Bryan also questioned the timing and funding of the bill. "After we have gotten rid of the entire executive team? The head of legal is gone, the head of operations is gone, the head of transmission is gone, the C.E.O is gone and the C.F.O. is gone. If the board wants a transition team they are hiring entire new executive staff. Why would you submit a piece of legislation that

has no funding base for it for us to spend 10 more million dollars on managing a plan when that money could be going into the infrastructure.”

Mr. Bryan added, “For me as governor now, all I want to do is two things: I want to keep the power reliable and the rate low.”

He later stated, “If we could get the Senate to stop putting up legislation we could gain the confidence of investors to refinance the VITOL project that is at 15 percent interest right now. If we could get that refinanced at 3 percent it would lower the cost of power immediately.”

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