

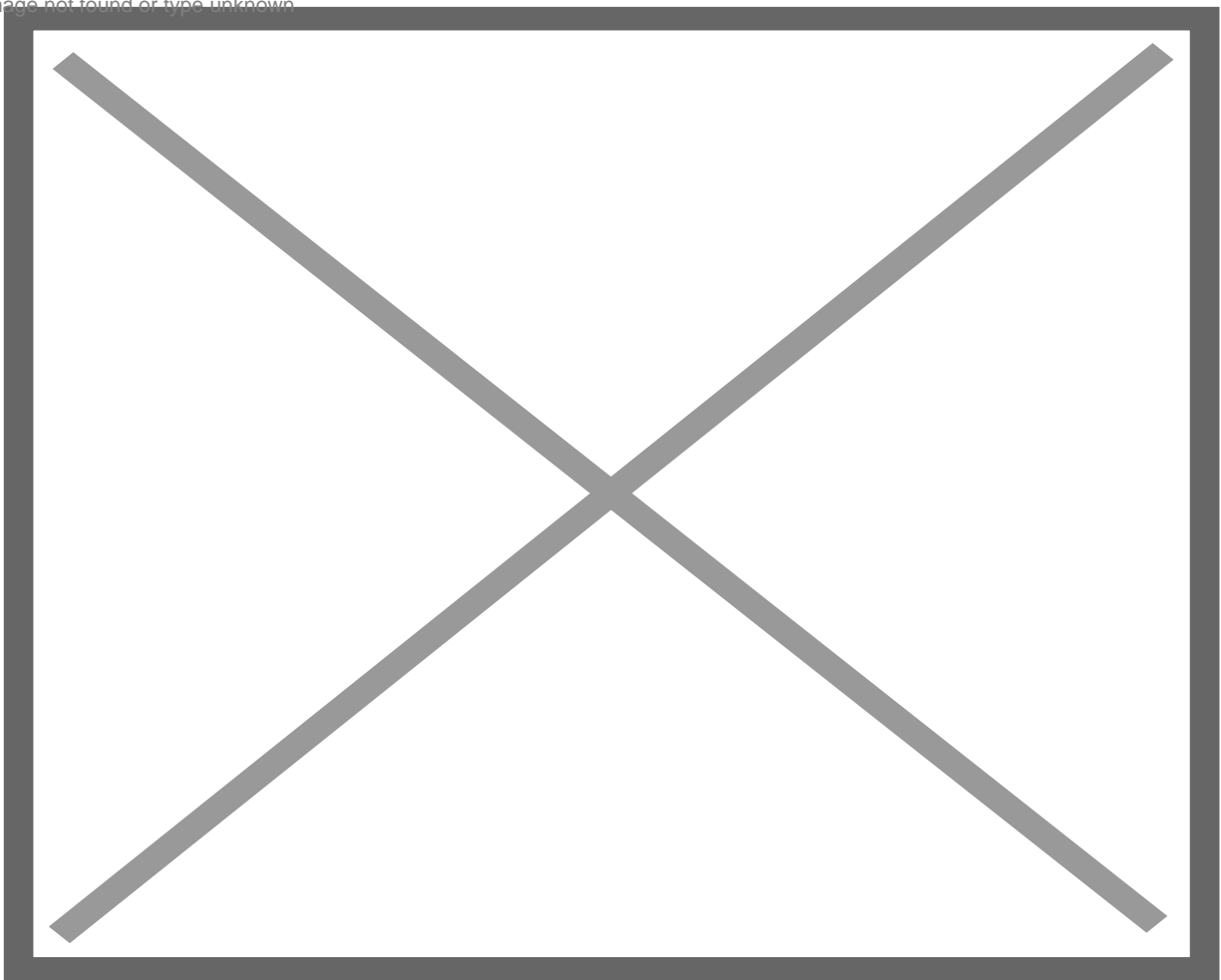
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Gittens-Sponsored Bill Calls for Special Investigator to Examine WAPA and Make Prosecutorial Recommendations to U.S. Attorney's Office and Local A.G.

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Night shot of the WAPA Richmond Plant By. VI CONSORTIUM

Senator Kenneth Gittens and Monday said that given the many serious problems at the V.I. Water and Power Authority, he has determined the best course forward is to authorize via legislation a thorough examination of the authority's contracts, leases, billing practices and other problematic issues such as credit card use and the loss of more than \$2 million to an offshore account.

He said an independent investigation is necessary to root out corruption at WAPA and to help restore accountability to the institution.

To that end, Mr. Gittens has introduced Bill No. 34-0080, which calls for the appointment of a special investigator with the authority to thoroughly review concerns related to WAPA and to make prosecutorial recommendations to the Virgin Islands Attorney General and the U.S. Attorney. The investigator will have the power to issue subpoenas for evidence and witnesses and to engage government auditors and personnel as necessary to assist in the inquiry, according to the legislation.

“We have uncovered a great deal of malfeasance and a general lack of accountability at WAPA without any real resolution or prosecution of those responsible,” said Mr. Gittens. “The more we learn, the more concerned I grow about how these issues are being handled given the Legislature’s limited ability to address WAPA’s internal operations and the Governor’s vetoes of the legislation we passed to create an oversight entity. At this point we require a special investigation and expert analysis of these problematic deals and financial transactions.”

According to the release, the senator said he looks forward to a robust discussion about his legislation in the Government Operations & Consumer Protection Committee on August 6.

“We will have to pay for this investigation, but the cost is very low relative to the waste and fraud we are already aware of at WAPA. We must stop the bleeding and hold those in charge accountable,” he said.

The veteran lawmaker called for the 2019 subpoenas of WAPA documents and personnel that helped bring to light many problems at the utility. Previous legislation introduced by Mr. Gittens to address concerns related to improving utility service has since had a positive impact on the Public Services Commission’s ability to handle consumer complaints, the release stated.

The Ratepayers Bill of Rights was made law last year in the 33rd Legislature.

“Bill #33-0272 codified basic consumer protections regarding disconnections, billing disputes, and other matters and has empowered the Public Services Commission to intervene on behalf of consumers with concerns about their WAPA bills,” Mr. Gittens said. “However, we can’t stop there. WAPA’s inefficiency is endangering our economy as a whole. We have had poor decision making at every turn and ongoing instances of waste, fraud, and conflicts of interest. There is no question that the Legislature has exposed problems at WAPA and I am urging further collaboration to appoint this special investigator to begin working as soon as is possible.”

The legislator said he is hoping for unanimous support from his colleagues and the rapid approval of this critical legislation.

“The people of the Virgin Islands have suffered far too long,” he said. “Senators must use every tool at our disposal to enforce change at WAPA and, unfortunately, the appointment of a special investigator is essential at this time.”