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Completion of Composite Pole Installation Delayed by a Year; WAPA Board Approves Extensions for This and Other Projects

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Workers installing composite poles on the East End of St. Croix in July 2019 By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Governing Board of the V.I. Water and Power Authority has approved time extensions for the completion of projects that are anticipated to increase the quality of drinking water and the reliability of electricity generation in the territory.

During a scheduled board meeting on Thursday, board members voted to extend the contract period for the Clifton Hill Waterline Rehabilitation from February 2023 to July 1, 2023. The water line rehabilitation project began in the summer of 2022 and is 85 percent complete, the board was

advised. Replacement of deteriorating iron water lines with PVC piping is already completed in Christiansted and Frederiksted, leaving the remaining 2 percent of St. Croix's system to be addressed.

The project will improve the quality of water in these pipelines, and will reduce service interruptions caused by waterline breaks. Thus far, the project is estimated to have reduced water loss by one million gallons, and WAPA anticipates millions of dollars in monthly savings once it is fully complete.

The board also approved an extension of the Randolph Harley Power Plant New Generation Wärtsilä project, pushing completion date to March 31, 2023. When complete, the project will result in the installation of four nine-megawatt Wärtsilä engines, a nine-megawatt battery and a new battery storage system.

Chavante Marsh, WAPA's internal country management director, said the extension is needed to allow the contractor to continue ongoing civil construction, mechanical, and electrical installation efforts for the project.

The goal is to have the new facilities online by the end of March 2023 to provide sufficient power generation capacity on St. Thomas and to provide stability for the overall plant, with the battery installation acting as a buffer against plant outages. "We have reached several major milestones for this project including the beginning of the construction," Ms. Marsh said.

WAPA Chief Executive Officer Andrew Smith told the board that the more efficient units produce more electricity for every unit of fuel used. "What that translates to in dollars is three to three-and-a-half million dollars [monthly] in the cost of fuel savings because of that efficiency," he noted.

That \$36 to \$42 million a year, according to Mr. Smith, is a quarter of WAPA's annual fuel cost. However, he said because WAPA's operating costs are currently four to six million dollars higher than what customers are being billed, those savings will not immediately be reflected in lower consumer rates. It would, however, contribute to stabilizing the utility company, which is currently being subsidized by the government on fuel costs.

Apart from an extension of time, Ms. Marsh also requested an additional \$1.1 million to complete the \$75 million Wartsila installation project. Among other aspects, she said the money was needed to connect the substations to increase system reliability and provide backup generation options.

Meanwhile, the board learned that supply chain issues were delaying the project to install composite poles across the territory. Cornell Jacobs, acting manager of transmission and distribution requested a contract extension from February 23, 2023 to February 23, 2024 and an additional \$1.7 million to allow Barclay Technologies to order materials and to iron out administrative efforts.

The project is 80 percent finished, Mr. Jacobs said, 73 percent complete on St. Croix and 79 percent complete in the St John-St. Thomas District. Installation on Water Island is 100 percent complete. Currently, according to Jacobs, the company installs 40 poles each week.

"We have run into material issues that at times do slow down the project but the project is continuing with looking into optimizing how materials are received," he said.

Composite poles have an eighty-year life span and are designed to withstand sustained wind speeds of up to 200 miles per hour.

Once the pole transition is complete, WAPA will move on to installing underground electrical project in business districts and vulnerable areas to ultimately phase out wooden electrical poles in the Virgin Islands.

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