

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Francis to Address Long-standing Issues in First 100 Days as President of Legislature

Government / **Published On February 01, 2023 05:33 PM /**

Elesha George **February 01, 2023**



Senator Novelle Francis, Jr. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Within the first 100 days of his ascension to president of the 35th Legislature, Senator Novelle Francis wants to make headway on long-standing issues that affect the territory's ability to earn revenue and to raise the standard of living for its residents.

To that end, Mr. Francis says he will prioritize hearing issues that affect large segments of the public, like helping to find a solution to the fractious debt negotiations between Vitol and the Water and Power Authority.

“There is a game plan in place to hopefully resolve some of the issues that’s plaguing WAPA and we intend to follow through on that. And, within our first 100 days, I believe that we’d want to develop that schematic, plan of action that we could start to check off the box and how we could start to see some improvements in the WAPA situation,” Mr. Francis said, speaking during a video production of the Legislature.

The energy company claims that WAPA owes it a propane infrastructure debt of \$150 million dollars, however WAPA is contesting the amount owed, creating a stalemate between the two parties.

The sum owed to Vitol is a combination of unfulfilled infrastructure payments as well as penalties and fees that Vitol has invoiced the authority for. The Vitol debt is in addition to \$40 million that WAPA owes to other vendors including retirement benefits to the Government Employees Retirement System (GERS).

The majority of the authority’s debt was accumulated over the last two years, with Chief Financial Officer Jacob Lewis testifying before the Legislature last October that WAPA had to defer payments to virtually every vendor in order to balance rising energy costs with keeping electricity rates affordable.

In his testimony, Mr. Lewis shared that the authority makes electricity by burning approximately 80 percent propane and 20 percent diesel but spends over 90 percent of its revenue on fuel, debt service, and payroll.

Without Vitol’s propane infrastructure, WAPA would continue to pay significantly more to produce electricity using diesel, though the parties have reached a temporary solution that allows business to continue while negotiations are ongoing. The massive debt also means that the utility company has the threat of territory-wide power outages lingering over its head.

“That is something that we’re looking forward to hearing and doing our part to make sure that’s resolved,” the Senate president declared.

In the meantime, the government continues to subsidize the operations of WAPA through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). As of late 2022, it gave the company \$28 million to subsidize fuel purchases.

Another priority item for Mr. Francis is to address inadequate elderly care facilities within the territory. He has hinted at advancing legislation to expand elderly care services and to introduce an “adult daycare” program.

“We also want to be mindful of those caretakers as well because outside of the issue of the chronic illnesses of our seniors, we also have those caretakers that have to deal with this on an everyday basis. So, we’re having a discussion about even having an adult daycare,” he noted.

These and other focus areas like behavioral and mental healthcare, and diversifying the work force, all have a direct impact on the people living in the USVI — a consideration Mr. Francis insisted will be the focal point of each legislative encounter.

“I want to make sure that we’re moving the people’s agenda forward ... I intend to conduct several town hall meetings, bring the issues to the people, have them voice their concerns, and get colleagues to hear directly from our community members,” he said.

Senator Francis also shared his intention to work with the Bryan administration to ensure the completion of projects outlined in the governor’s State of the Territory Address, such as the opening of JFL North facility this March.

“We want to make sure that that happens,” he remarked.

“I share in that optimism because I believe I represent hope. Hope for the people. So then it’s my intention to get into the details, the granular of the state of the territory to make sure that we are actually ensuring that that optimism is met,” he said.

Mr. Francis, as president of the Senate, also chairs the legislative body’s Committee of the Whole.