

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Aging Water Infrastructure Leads to Unreliable Supply, Skyrocketing WAPA Bill for VIHA Totaling \$7 Million Annually

Government / **Published On March 01, 2023 06:42 AM /**

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Deferred maintenance issues in public housing units are driving eye watering utility bills for the Virgin Islands Housing Authority. VIHA said it is expecting to have to pay the V.I. Water and Power Authority up to \$7 million in water expenses this year.

Speaking to members of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications on Monday, VIHA officials said that aged and leaky pipes, as well as failing plumbing systems are contributing to elevated water usage rates. Consumption is projected at 237 million gallons of water for 2000 occupied units under the agency's

control.

"We've identified that some of the leaks are running toilets, having to replace flappers. There's also leaks within many of the walls because of the age of the assets," said Jimmy Farmer, asset management director for VIHA.

"The Housing Authority's public housing is 60 years old, and the building systems are way past their useful life," said Robert A. Graham, VIHA executive director. Mr. Graham noted that they are limited in terms of resources and personnel within the maintenance department. He said that during the last two years of the pandemic, VIHA was hampered by a shortage of materials and vacancies of 20 staff positions needed to complete routine work orders.

"In general, VIHA has approximately 1,700 open work orders with approximately 350 work orders coming in monthly, but only completing around 300 work orders that are health, safety, or emergency repairs," Mr. Graham noted.

The average household in a VIHA unit uses about 118,500 gallons of water each year. Still, some of its residents go days and sometimes weeks without pipe borne water because of the faults that plague the aging buildings.

Additionally, the municipal water supply is so unreliable that VIHA often has to truck water to residences at its own expense since the water bill is included in the rent agreement.

"There aren't any cisterns that are operational, so if water is not available from WAPA then the Housing Authority will provide a water truck for that temporary discontinuation," he remarked.

Lydia Pelle, VIHA's chief operating officer, told lawmakers that even when there is water in the pipes, the quality of that water is woefully inadequate for the residents' needs and also contributes to the high bills.

"Our residents are consistently being hampered by this," she said. "They can't even wash white clothes, it turns a whole different color."

Ms. Pelle added, "We've been coordinating with WAPA to try and get this situation resolved. They contributed to flushing lines, adding chemicals to the water but the situation continues and it's very frustrating for our residents hence some of the cause of some of the high consumption of water in our water bills."

Senator Novelle Francis described the water as coming out like "crude oil" on St. Croix.

"I think there should be some level of push back because I mean the amount of times that you have to run that water to be able to flow, even to get something that's reasonably clean, is ridiculous," he complained.

Complaints about plumbing infrastructure and other maintenance issues in VIHA units have been skyrocketing, committee Chair Senator Marvin Blyden lamented.

"I have never gotten so much complaints on a daily basis. I can't even go into the communities anymore. It's an issue in terms of maintenance and the response to maintenance complaints," Mr. Blyden said.

These ongoing faults, plumbing-related and otherwise, necessitate constant maintenance but Mr. Graham explained that it would require approximately twenty times as much funding as they receive in a year to fix all the problems in the aging buildings. "The physical needs assessment for these developments is \$200 million, we receive \$10 million a year for capital improvements," Graham told senators.

As a result, VIHA relies heavily on the rents collected from their units to fund needed repairs and maintenance. However, the authority faces challenges in this regard as well. VIHA said that \$1 million in rent remains outstanding for the last fiscal year.

Mr. Graham said that on average rent charges are budgeted at \$4 million annually. Currently, he said, residents in both districts owe a balance of approximately \$823,300. St. Thomas/St. John has 326 households with a balance of \$561,500 while St. Croix has 178 households with a balance of \$261,800.

That uncollected money would have otherwise been spent to address overdue repairs in the units.

The entire situation leads to something of a Catch-22 for VIHA: while maintenance work on units are pending, the authority charges less rent until repairs are completed.

To ameliorate the issue of poor water infrastructure, VIHA says it intends to develop an educational program with targeted consumption for an energy-conscious household. This will focus on plumbing line repairs and replacing faucets, toilets, and shower heads in units with the largest usage.

In terms of residents' ability to meet their rent obligations, some have received assistance from the Housing Finance Authority administered Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). In other cases, "VIHA continues to work with residents to enter into manageable repayment Agreements," Mr. Graham said. "Our 'Helping Hands' program's objective is to provide an option for residents to pay down delinquent rents and remain in good standing," he continued.

The U.S. Virgin Islands continues to face a housing crisis as a result of the 2017 hurricanes that damaged more than half of all households in the territory, with more than 10 percent reported severely damaged.