

Kupfer, Set to Leave WAPA, Seeks to Create New Job For Rhymer After Board Defunds \$150,000 Plus Position

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Lawrence Kupfer and Gregory Rhymer By VI LEGISLATURE

A day after the governing board of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority voted overwhelmingly to direct the executive director to defund a top management position and terminate the employee holding the post, VI Consortium has learned that the utility's embattled director, Lawrence Kupfer, is preparing to slip the employee into another leadership position in the authority.



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At a regular monthly meeting Thursday, and while in a more than five-hour closed-to-the-public executive session where legal and personnel matters were discussed and acted on, the Consortium has learned that the board voted 7-2 to direct Mr. Kupfer to defund the position held by long-time employee Gregory Rhymer, effectively terminating him as special advisor to the CEO.

Voting against the move to strip Mr. Rhymer of his more than \$150,000 a year position were board chairman and Property & Procurement Commissioner Anthony Thomas, and board member Noel Loftus. Mr. Loftus and two other board members, Juanita Young and Cheryl Boynes Jackson, continue to serve terms that have long expired.

Voting to eliminate Mr. Rhymer's position were Vice Chairman Jed JohnHope, Secretary Young, Energy Office Director Kyle Fleming, BIR Director Joel Lee, and members Elizabeth Armstrong, retired WAPA employee Hubert Turnbull and Boynes Jackson.

WAPA Communications Director Jean Greaux, Jr., in response to a request for confirmation of this story said he is not authorized to comment on personnel matters.

Insiders tell VI Consortium that the vote on Thursday capped a long-held belief by members of the board that frequently repeated allegations of corruption and malfeasance against Mr. Rhymer should be thoroughly and independently investigated, an effort that has won little support from Mr. Thomas. In fact, at a mid-January meeting, again in a closed-door executive session, board members approved a motion for Mr. Kupfer to work alongside the authority's Internal Audit Division to probe the allegations against Mr. Rhymer. However, that investigation was never initiated.

By Friday morning, reports surfaced within the 34th Legislature and amongst WAPA employees that Mr. Kupfer is preparing to take action that stand in contrast to the vote the board cast on Thursday. One insider told the Consortium that Mr. Kupfer's plan is to name Rhymer as the authority's chief administrative officer, filling a vacancy brought by the resignation of Rupert Pelle earlier this month. The naming of Mr. Rhymer as the chief administrative officer would make him an officer of the authority. In that position, he would oversee the procurement division, property management, and

security, among other operational areas.

In 2020, Mr. Pelle retained St. Croix attorney Lee Rohn to defend him against what were characterized as baseless attempts to discipline him. In correspondence to the board, Mr. Pelle named Kupfer, Rhymer, and the agency's Human Resources Director Sabrina King Leonce as [leading calculated efforts to discipline](#) him for non-existent, fictitious and undocumented performance shortcomings.

On the floor of the Senate, Mr. Rhymer has faced harsh criticism from lawmakers for his role in controversial projects at WAPA over the years including the oil to propane conversion project with VITOL, which doubled in cost from \$80 million to \$167 million. Mr. Rhymer was a leading figure for WAPA on the project and has frequently gone toe to toe with senators and members of the Public Services Commission on WAPA issues and the validity of the propane project.

Under the tenure of then-executive director Hugo Hodge, Jr, Rhymer oversaw the buildout of a customer service center in Four Winds at a cost more than \$1 million. Both Rhymer and Hodge were at the time roundly criticized by board members for the runaway costs of building out a previously occupied commercial space.

As a coordinator of WAPA's emergency response to the 2017 hurricanes, Mr. Rhymer was alleged to have either been involved in or approved the process by which FEMA-provided restoration supplies were shipped out of the territory to the British Virgin Islands. While WAPA defended the actions as "helping out a neighbor in need" given the devastation in the BVI by the same storms, many, including senators, frowned on the decision to give away equipment that was needed here to restore electrical service.

As recently as Thursday's board meeting, members criticized a fuel oil contract extension Mr. Rhymer is said to have negotiated with Glencore Limited. The six-month arrangement, through June 30, 2021, calls for WAPA to pay \$13,000 a day to Glencore to maintain a barge in the Caribbean to service the power plants. The barge charge came about when the company cited that the vastly reduced volume of oil being procured by WAPA made the supply contract a nonviable arrangement for Glencore. While Glencore has slightly reduced the cost of the fuel it supplies, the exorbitant daily rate for the barge has raised eyebrows among board members, senators, and members of the public alike.

On Thursday, Ms. Armstrong was critical of the arrangement and bemoaned the fact that WAPA hastily agreed to the Glencore contract extension terms without investigating other options such as purchasing oil from the refinery rack on St. Croix and having the fuel trucked to the Richmond Power Plant. On St. Thomas, critics of the contract extension have said WAPA could negotiate with other fuel wholesalers to truck the needed oil shipments to the Harley power plant in Krum Bay, negating the need for the barge, its associated costs, and even the contract extension with Glencore.

The Consortium has also learned that Mr. Kupfer has advised the board that he is not interested in having his employment contract renewed when it expires on Sunday. Mr. Kupfer has been at the helm of WAPA since March 2018 at an annual salary of \$200,000 plus various incentives and bonuses. Mr. Kupfer has said he would remain in the position for 90 days to allow for a smooth transition to a new director.

Mr. Rhymer has been Mr. Kupfer's leading go-to person on a variety of day to day operational issues at WAPA over the last three years.

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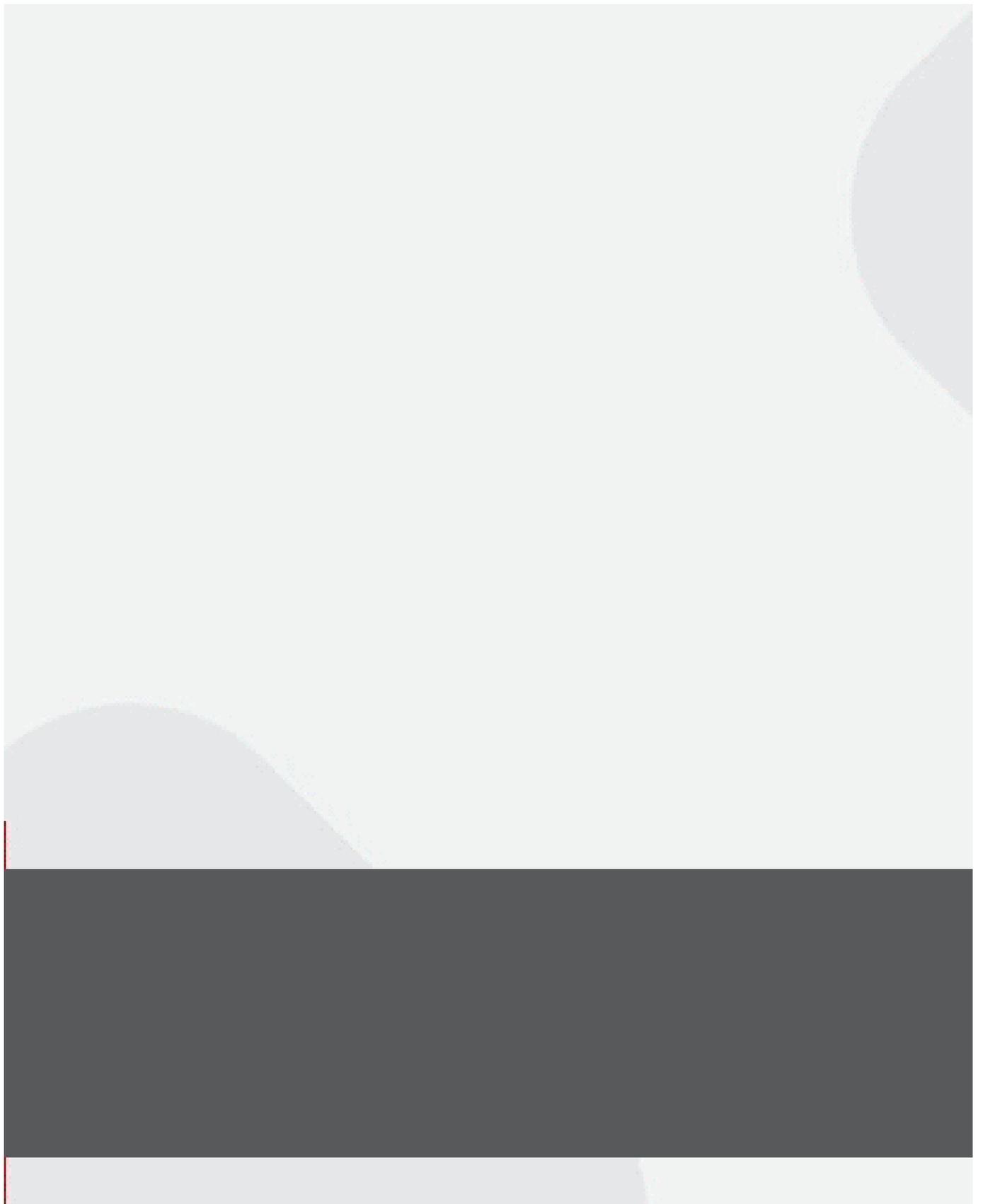
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