

TESTIMONY OF RAVINDRA MAYWAHLALL
LIBERTY VI COUNTRY MANAGER
BEFORE THE 35TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS
COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS
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Mr. Chairman, members of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, senators, legislative staff, ladies and gentlemen, I am Ravindra Maywahlall, Liberty VI Country Manager. I have spent the last 35 years in the Virgin Islands and have amalgamated over 20 years of experience in the telecommunications industry. I was most recently the Country Manager for the FLOW operations in BVI and Anguilla and was instrumental in the rebuilding of the fixed and mobile networks after hurricanes Irma and Maria, among other things. I'm looking forward to putting my experience to work improving our services in the USVI. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this Committee to provide an update of ongoing work, present infrastructure projects and plans for future development. I take this opportunity to introduce John Winter, Chief Legal Officer and Aamir Hussain, Chief Technology and Product Officer for our parent company Liberty Latin America, Jose Arias, Director of Construction, Victor Vera, Director of RAN Engineering, Carla Framil, VP of Legal, Wanda Pérez, Government Affairs Internal Counsel and Catherine Kling, Director of Commercial Sales, all of whom can take your questions later.

I want to start describing the upgrades and improvements we have made to our mobile network and our projects for this year. We are excited to inform that in 2023, Liberty completed 4 new FirstNet site launches. These are in Clairmont, Sallys Fancy, Green Cay and West End. These installations will not only allow for the installation of Band 14, making the areas more secure in any event, but they will also allow us to provide service or improve coverage to regular customers in the area.

In terms of mobile coverage, we increased the number of sites this year from 32 to 36 sites, all of which have LTE technology while 19 have 5G technology. These sites cover 99.1% of the population, according to the last Census. Out of these sites, 58%, up from 52% last year, have fiber backhaul which means that more than half of the sites have resilient backhaul with high bandwidth. With all these additions, coverage has significantly improved with respect to 5G. By the end of 2023, we had 94.55%. We also improved LTE coverage by 1.1% in 2023.

We also have 58 deployment projects scheduled for 2024 which include the following:

(11)- 5G overlay projects

This will help to extend this technology to all residents in USVI.

(2)- Site relocations in St. Thomas

This will allow us to move our infrastructure to areas where they will provide better service or more coverage. During 2023, we had been working with the permitting phase of these projects. They are forecasted to be on air 2024.

(30)- LTE/5G expansion projects

These are to install 5G technology in already existing sites improving the service speed for customers using those sites.

(10)- C-RAN (small cells)

We also have plans to install C-RAN or small cell infrastructure in ten locations where traffic is dense or have little coverage. All these nodes will be connected to a new Hub. This technology is important because it can help with network densification by shifting traffic from macro cell sites and adding capacity to the wireless network. Now, this technology can be very effective in the USVI and can help us reach our coverage targets, but the USVI does not have a small cell law or regulation. Without legislation or specific regulation, there is no clear path to proceed, and implementation of these small facilities will be challenging. More than 30 states across the nation have already implemented small cell legislation that streamlines regulations to facilitate 5G deployment. In the past we have sent a draft small cell bill to this Committee for evaluation. We hope this 35th Senate can move forward with this legislation to create a clear permitting process to improve telecommunication services in the Territory.

5) New site builds (monopoles)

We also aim to address coverage and capacity issues with five additional new site builds or monopoles. Two of these new sites will be in St. Thomas, two in St. Croix, and one in St. John.

Most of these sites are part of the commitment between the USVI government and the FirstNet Authority, including the four New Site Builds which were completed and brought on air in St. Croix last year. As you all know, FirstNet is an independent authority within the U.S. Department of Commerce designed to build and operate a nationwide broadband network (Band 14) that allows first responders to have a reliable communication system in place before, during, and after a natural disaster. For this, it is deploying the first nationwide, high-speed wireless broadband network for public safety. The network will give priority to first responders to send voice or text messages, images, video, and location information in real-time in cases of emergency. After a competitive process the FirstNet Authority entered into a public-private partnership with AT&T to build the network and deliver the required services to maintain the network.

Liberty is committed to providing great service and coverage to all Virgin Islanders. As part of this commitment Liberty has already installed Band 14 capabilities to 26 LTE sites, up from 18 last year, providing more coverage than that included in the original commitment with AT&T. Because of this investment, right now the USVI has 98.9% Band 14 coverage and is forecasted to have 99% coverage by the end of 2024.

As we mentioned the last time we were here, back in October, Liberty has already started construction of the Connect USVI program which requires us to build fixed broadband service to all locations in the USVI with speeds of 1 gigabit per second. This program is funded partially by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with an important private investment from Liberty. Liberty will have six years to complete the network expansions, upgrades, disaster preparation and resiliency projects to which it committed. Approximately 85% of Liberty's Network will be built underground, providing better resiliency against natural disasters. The USVI will probably be the only country in the world with 100% fiber to the home and with such a large percentage of its fixed network secured underground. We are required by the FCC to build 40% (18,400 home passes (HPs)) by 2024, 60% (27,600 HPs) by 2025, 80% (36,800 HPs) by 2026 with project completion by 2027.

Unfortunately, permitting delays have not allowed us to build at the speed required to ensure we complete our milestones on time. To this day we have submitted to DPW 75 permit packages which are the equivalent of 19,332 home passes. DPW has approved 18 permit packages that amount to approximately 4,000 home passes and still has 57 packages waiting approval. These remaining packages would amount to 15,332 home passes. We continue conversations with DPW to try to get our permit packages approved in a more expedient way. Some permits have been submitted for several months and we haven't received an answer. We have agreed to provide a 5-year warranty and a third-party inspector for all the work. We have reached an agreement on these, in the hope that the process moves along expediently going forward.

Liberty has the necessary materials and equipment to build out in the Territory, as well as an engaged contractor. Now, we need 100 miles of continuous work every year to build out in a more effective and efficient manner to meet our milestones. For this we need the permits that account for the HPs targets. This would allow us to move forward faster to reach our milestones in time.

These projects as designed, will provide underground fiber optic cables that will protect our infrastructure from natural disasters and make it more resilient. We want to highlight that this construction will also drastically improve broadband speeds and reliability and also increase bandwidth capacity to existing and new cell sites for FirstNet, that provides coverage to first responders and provide broadband services to all homes and businesses within the designated areas.

Liberty currently has 9 projects in the construction phase. These projects are:

1. Sallys Fancy (STX)
2. Donoe (STT)
3. WTJX Mt.Top (STT)
4. Williams Delights 1 (STX)
5. Williams Delights 2 (STX)
6. Williams Delights 3 (STX)
7. Smith Bay (STT)
8. Green Cay (STX)
9. East End (STX)

The locations for 2023 were identified along with DPW (and to a large extent, recommended by DPW) based on other utilities and paving work that are taking place and the sequencing of those coordinated efforts. Another key criterion is that Liberty wanted to start in locations that are more accessible first to focus our resources and also to prove the concept to DPW and to the market.

This year we need to reach the 18,400 HPs milestone, or 40% of the deployment. To reach this goal, we need DPW to approve the necessary permits in a reasonable and faster timeframe. Liberty's existing buildout plans include making its services available to homes and businesses in every location it completes within a matter of weeks after completion.

We are also happy to say that we have had several meetings with WAPA leadership and expect to receive a draft pole attachment agreement this week. We hope this agreement will be finalized in an expedient manner allowing us to meet our construction milestone.

Finally, we have been migrating our customers from AT&T systems to our new Liberty systems. This process has been ongoing for several months and will be completed before the end of March 2024. We have migrated approximately 47,000 customers. The migration process has had its challenges. But we calculate that more than 95% of the customers experienced no issues during their migration.

In order to keep our customers informed and facilitate the process, we have been communicating with customers via email and SMS since last year in preparation for the migration. These communications include phone numbers to answer any question or concern the customer may have. We have also provided information in the radio and local newspapers. Some customers will need to reconfigure or change their device to ensure a successful update. We are providing replacement devices free of charge, so there is no investment required on the part of the customer. The migration to our new systems is made gradually and each customer is notified again a few days before when they will be migrated. We keep working tirelessly to finish the migration process and providing the best service for our customers. Once completed, we will be capable of offering our customers products that will be more USVI centric.

Liberty has committed significant resources to expansion of its physical footprint in the U.S. Virgin Islands, with retail storefronts open from Monday to Saturday to help ease customer wait times and has diligently focused on smoothing out the perceived wrinkles in the transition from billing and customer service assistance for existing customers with AT&T's systems.

As we have mentioned in previous appearances, we are here as a partner to this Legislature and the Government of the Virgin Islands as a whole. We will be agents of change to provide improved telecommunications services to Virgin Islanders. Improving the permitting process will allow us to cover areas that remain uncommunicated or with poor service, with reliability and resilience that may not exist anywhere else in the world. This situation has become an urgent matter for Liberty, and we are considering elevating the matter to other forums seeking a resolution. Delays in DPW permitting are putting in jeopardy federal money that was allocated to make high speed broadband service to all Virgin Islanders and we request urgent action on this matter.

We want to work with this Commission and its members, as a community partner, revolutionising the telecommunication space and partnering with the government of the USVI and the community as a whole, to make these Virgin Islands better for future generations to come; by ensuring that the USVI have a best in class telecommunication infrastructure that will attract more businesses to the territory and provide best in class services to the citizens of these islands.

Once again, I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. Please let me know if I can provide you any additional information or clarification. I would welcome any questions that you may have.

Respectfully,



Ravindra Maywahlall