



VIRGIN ISLANDS WATER AND POWER AUTHORITY

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OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

January 22, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Marvin A. Blyden
Chairman
Committee on Housing, Transportation, & Telecommunications
35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building, P.O. Box 1690
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands 00804

Re: Hearing – Quality of Telecommunications and Broadband in the Territory
January 24, 2024

Dear Chairman Blyden,

In response to your request for testimony on, among other matters, the items outlined below, please find attached the testimony of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority.

- *Issues and challenges regarding coordination between telecommunications providers and government agencies on issues such as permitting, access to poles and conduits, customer service issues, etc.; and*

Sincerely,

Andrew L. Smith
Executive Director/CEO

TESTIMONY

I am Andrew L. Smith, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, which I may refer to as WAPA or the Authority. I would like to thank the Honorable Chair, Senator Blyden, as well as other members of the Senate present for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss WAPA's role as it relates to the quality of telecommunications and broadband in the Territory.

WAPA's role in telecommunications and broadband in the Territory is to allow telecommunications and broadband providers access to WAPA's utility infrastructure. In addition to telecommunications and broadband infrastructure, WAPA also has other infrastructure that attaches to its power poles, for example ShotSpotter, which is used by law enforcement to identify and locate gunfire.

Telecommunications and broadband providers are required to perform and provide the engineering analysis to ensure that their equipment can be safely installed on WAPA's poles. Providers are also required to comply with all electrical and other safety standards as well as federal requirements for their installations and equipment operation. For example, recent changes to the National Electrical Safety Code have enacted new requirements for Radio Frequency (RF) emitting devices to have a method of disconnecting and continuous exposure monitoring for technicians and linemen to be able to work safely on poles where these devices are located.

The telecommunications providers pay WAPA a fee for pole attachments, which is customary in the utility industry. WAPA

historically charged telecommunications providers less than \$200,000.00 per year for pole attachments; however, the rate WAPA has been charging for pole attachments is outdated.

The foregoing is all governed by a pole attachment agreement, in the case of a private third-party counterparty, or a memorandum of understanding, if the counterparty is a governmental agency. WAPA's pole attachment agreement was significantly outdated having been developed approximately 30 years ago. A revised, modernized pole attachment agreement has been developed, and has been shared with the telecommunications providers. The charges for pole attachments in the current agreement were benchmarked against industry standards through coordination with the American Public Power Association, an industry trade association as well as other utilities.

WAPA's system includes approximately 40,000 installed utility poles.

One aspect of pole attachments is that WAPA must evaluate, and most critically, locate poles that are requested for attachments by telecommunications providers. This is a challenge for WAPA because following the storms of 2017, WAPA's focus was on quickly restoring service to as many customers as it could. As a result, the infrastructure and their placement are not mapped to the specificity required to easily locate and evaluate poles. WAPA is currently working through a mapping of its system with the Davey Resource Group, funded by a federal grant, that will make the process of identifying and locating poles easier. That mapping process is expected to be completed by the third quarter of this year across the Territory.

Another aspect of pole attachments is that the analysis must be performed to ensure that the weight of the attachments being requested to be placed on the poles can be supported by the pole. In some cases,

upgrades to the pole or other improvements are required to support the requested equipment attachments. Wind loading is especially important in this analysis, because improper wind loading could make WAPA's poles vulnerable to failure in the event of a storm with high winds.

Another important factor to note is that if holes are going to be drilled in composite poles, the work must be performed per the pole manufacturer's specifications or else the warranty on the pole could be voided. Composite poles are expensive, costing almost \$9,000 each, versus less than \$1,000 each for all but the largest wooden poles used by WAPA. Accordingly, preserving the warranty on the poles is critical.

WAPA supports the installation of critical telecommunications and broadband infrastructure. As I have described in my testimony, WAPA must ensure that pole attachments are installed in a way such that the installation of the additional equipment does not put the utility's system at risk.

This concludes my testimony. Again, I thank the Senate and the public for the opportunity to discuss WAPA's support for telecommunications and broadband in the Territory. I would also like to thank the hardworking men and women who work around the clock, regardless of weather, daylight, or nighttime in the WAPA family.