



26A Annas Retreat  
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**TESTIMONY OF  
MIKE SMITH, CTO OF ONE COMMUNICATIONS  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS**

**April 8, 2026**

Honorable Chairman Marvin Blyden, Members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, members of the 36<sup>th</sup> Legislature and their staff, and the listening and viewing audience, my name is Mike Smith and I am the Chief Technology Officer for the Virgin Islands Telephone Corporation, responsible for overseeing our outside plant operations. Thank you for inviting me to testify on Bill No. 36-0074

One Communications operates the Territory's most extensive telecommunications network, with infrastructure passing more than 95 percent of homes and businesses. While we own a limited number of utility poles, the vast majority of our network is attached to poles owned and maintained by the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA). We recognize—and share—the Senate's concern that inadequate vegetation management around these facilities has contributed to service disruptions, particularly during inclement weather. We appreciate the Committee's willingness to explore new approaches to this longstanding problem. However, we must respectfully oppose Bill No. 36-0074 because, despite its intent, it is likely to create more challenges than it resolves.

The most visible consequences of insufficient vegetation management occur during storms, when trees and overgrown brush become entangled with utility lines. Even relatively mild weather events can cause outsized damage and prolonged outages under these conditions. While we understand the desire to empower property owners to address vegetation on or near their land, authorizing thousands of



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individuals—many without training or proper equipment—to cut or clear vegetation around utility infrastructure introduces significant risks.

Our primary concern is the likelihood of inadvertent damage to telecommunications facilities. A single misstep with a machete, trimmer, or chainsaw can sever fiber or copper lines, resulting in outages that affect entire neighborhoods or business districts. When such damage occurs, One Communications is obligated to restore service promptly and to seek recovery of repair costs from the responsible party. Many property owners may be unable to bear these costs, especially if the damage affects a large number of customers or requires extensive restoration work.

The risks on the electrical side are even more serious. Contact with energized lines can cause severe injury or loss of life. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has established detailed requirements for any work performed within ten feet of energized power lines (29 C.F.R. § 1910.269(r)), underscoring the inherent dangers of this type of activity. These are not tasks that should be undertaken without specialized training, equipment, and safety protocols.

For these reasons, while we fully support the Senate's goal of improving vegetation management and strengthening the resilience of the Territory's infrastructure, we cannot support the approach outlined in Bill No. 36-0074. We stand ready to work with the Committee, WAPA, and other stakeholders to identify solutions that enhance public safety, protect critical infrastructure, and improve service reliability for all residents and businesses.

Thank you.