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Vlenergize Network Wants to Make 'Going Green' Easier



[1]The V.I. Water and Power Authority is planning to take a more active leadership role in the territory's renewable energy industry.

At a Chamber of Commerce breakfast Thursday, WAPA gave business leaders a "behind the curtain" preview of the Vlenergize network, a program they hope will streamline the installation of solar panels, wind turbines and energy saving technologies in businesses and homes throughout the islands.

Introducing the program, David McGeown of the McGeown Group said the core goal of the program was to increase the level of trust in all aspects of the renewable energy industry in the Virgin Islands, adding that businesses and banks have reason to be skeptical of some of the claims made by green companies.

"[You see] too many people looking like me coming in for three days with the best thing since sliced bread and then flying back to New Jersey with the money," he joked.

McGeown and his consulting firm are not new to the territory. They have been working with the government on ways to reduce fossil fuel consumption for the last several years. McGeown said the idea for Vlenergize developed from lessons they've learned working within the Virgin Islands.

He explained that the hurdles slowing down the adoption of energy saving technologies are twofold. First, businesses do not fully trust the cost-saving claims made by green products. Second, banks are weary of financing green energy projects. Vlenergize would attempt to tackle both issues, he said.

On the consumer side, Vlenergize plans to create a website that will rate and vet companies offering renewable energy and energy conservation services within the territory, not unlike the popular web service, Angie's List.

McGeown imagined the website as a place where individuals can compare the experience and expertise of competing companies. He said that initially anyone would be able to have their company listed, including people who "showed up yesterday with two dogs

and a pickup truck," but their credentials would be clearly posted. People consulting the site would be able to see how many projects the company had previously completed in the territory and read reviews from consumers who had worked with them in the past.

McGeown said that in the future the Vlenergize network may become pickier about who is listed on the site and force companies to meet certain credentialing or performance standards to participate in the program. He also said that companies could be suspended from the list if it's proven their work is sub par.

Vlenergize may also rate individual products, such as energy saving appliances. McGeown imagined a locally oriented program mimicking the national Energy Star campaign that would place stickers on products that have been proven to work in the particular conditions of the Virgin Islands. The program may also give consumers detailed instructions on how best to use the products to save the most amount of energy possible.

All of these steps, McGeown said, were aimed at helping consumers answer the question, "How do I trust that this thing is going to work and give me the savings that are claimed for this product?"

As for financing, McGeown said that Vlenergize would work with consumers and banks to facilitate loans. He stressed, however, that WAPA would not offer any loans directly.

"I promise you nobody wants WAPA engaged in banking activity," he said.

Often when loans are given to an individual or small business for energy conservation or renewable energy upgrades, they are designed so that the money saved by the upgrades is used to pay back the loans. McGeown said this is a problem in the Virgin Islands because often the local banks doubt the projects will save as much money as they claim.

Vlenergize would help alleviate these fears by reviewing proposed projects and putting their stamp of approval on the energy saving projections.

McGeown said that they may even project how much energy the customer saved each month and print savings on their WAPA bills

"We need to show the banks there is a reasonable likelihood that the customer will end up actually with cash in their pocket that they can use to repay that loan," he said.

These services would not be free. Fees collected by Vlenergize for their services would sustain the program. McGeown claimed that the new program would not become a financial burden for WAPA. He said they had secured a grant to cover start up costs and he was confident the network would be able to support itself.

He also stressed that Vlenergize would not be directly competing with any renewable energy or energy conservation companies in the territory. Rather, he said, the goal was to facilitate connections between consumers and those companies and to hopefully create more business opportunities for everyone involved.

Members of the chamber greeted the presentation with guarded optimism. During the

question round, most members expressed interest in the project, but some voiced doubt that it could achieve all the goals he laid out, especially convincing banks to loan more freely.

McGeown told them that Vienergize was still at an “embryonic stage” and that the program would adapt to the problems it faced. He also implored members of the chamber to send him feedback so the program could be better tailored to meet their needs.

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