

Good day Senate President Francis, members of the 35th Legislature and all persons present, listening and viewing. I am Carmen Wesselhoft-Hedrington, and I am thankful for the opportunity to testify today.

It is abundantly clear that a school is needed on St. John, and I know for a fact that I represent the voice of many persons throughout this territory by stating this. We are in favor of a school outside of town, away from the busy bars and commerce of our towns and with enough space for our children to learn and play. We are not in favor of trading land to accomplish this very important and reasonable community goal. A proper education is a human right and a proper tenet of American life. This school should not come at a cost, and it is very anti- American of the park to insist upon a trade. Where are your principles? I have lived on this island for 60 years and the only way I can explain how I feel about what is going on with the Virgin Islands national Park is that we are constantly being raped on St. John. When is enough, enough?

The Virgin Islands National Park own- almost two thirds of St. John more than seven thousand acres, as well as more than 13,000 acres of submerged land.

I have a couple examples in the ways in which the park infringes and imposes tax upon the daily lives of St. Johnians.

1. Local Taxi drivers must pay \$75.00 a year for a decal to drive through the National Park on Government roads that the National is supposed to maintain. However, there are delivery trucks (Merchant Market, West Indies, Concrete Trucks, Water Trucks etc. but they are not required to have a decal or pay a fee.
2. Commercial vessels must pay between \$300.00 to \$600.00 a year to sail through National Park Waters.
3. There is a five-dollar entrance fee to enter Trunk Bay for locals and visitors alike.
4. In addition to these fees, the National Park has gone cashless. If you do not have a debit Card, a credit card apple Pay or google Pay you cannot access Trunk Bay. It is another way in which to further alienate the population.
5. The National Park has yet to reopen the Johnny Horn Road and the road. to Leinster Bay and other Roads needed so that there are accessible routes to and from.
6. Caneel Bay has been a part of our economic structure on St. John for decades. Why are there so much politics to have it rebuilt?

We are constantly being taxed by the National Park and to be taxed for a school blatantly expresses that the wellbeing of St. Johnians, the education of St. Johnian children is not a priority for the park and that the park is not truly a member of our community but rather enemies of the community.

When the people of St. John were manipulated out of their land, and it was deemed as donation to what is now known as the Virgin Islands National Park the people had no idea it would create such hardship to the people of St. John. Today it has created a hard ship in terms of lack of developable land for infrastructure needed to support the populace, difficulty in accessing lands, the heightening of property taxes and now the inability to serve the community in one of the most basic ways.

Regarding the land swap, I believe our Cays should remain under local Control. We must leave something in our children's hands and at least try and protect what is left of their fishing and camping rights.

Construction of a school has been stymied by a false lack of available land on St. John. It has also stymied the construction of affordable housing, a nursing home or Senior facility, a fire station recreational facility, just to name a few.

As a result of rising land prices and property taxes, our families are broken apart, our culture and traditions are becoming increasingly at risk for loss. I believe that some change is inevitable, and we must take some significant steps towards supporting the families and children of St. John. However, that step is not a land swap.

Today we are lobbying for a school, what will it be tomorrow? I ask the Questions; will we have to continue giving to get? When is enough, enough?

We, St. Johnians are good stewards. For hundreds of years, we maintained this beautiful land so much so that they wanted to make it a National Park. We deserve the ability to continue to maintain our lives here. We deserve so much more than the National Park has given.

We have given so much to the National Park, the only Remedy is for the National Park to Give Back to the people of St. John.