

1 Good afternoon Honorable Novelle E. Francis, President of the 35th Legislature of the
2 Virgin Islands, members of the 35th Legislature, fellow testifiers, members of the Land Exchange
3 Task Force, fellow members of the St. John Community, and to the viewing and listening audience.
4 I am Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Commissioner of the Department of Education (VIDE). I appear
5 before you accompanied by St. John Administrator Shikima Jones Sprauve, Chaneel Callwood,
6 Architect VIDE, Commissioner of Property and Procurement Nominee, Lisa Alejandro, and
7 Director Sean L. Krigger on behalf of Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol of the Department of
8 Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR).

9 We are here today to further educational opportunities for St. John students and, for the
10 first time, to move the students of St. John to the head of the class. The legislation before us today
11 is nothing short of historic, with a convergence of funding, available property, and overwhelming
12 desire by parents, students, residents, and community leaders to see a modern pre-K-12 school
13 facility be constructed on the island of St. John.

14 Without exaggeration, it has been over 50 years of setbacks and obstacles to having a full
15 grade range school in St. John. We are today presented by this unique opportunity to improve our
16 children's education experience on the heels of decades of advocating and tireless work spanning
17 numerous Virgin Islands administrations and legislatures, and requiring leadership and support
18 from public officials across the nation.

19 The basis for considering the construction of a new school facility on St. John began with
20 the adverse impact on students living on St. John, commuting daily utilizing multiple forms of
21 transportation, leaving their homes in the darkness, and crossing the sea to St. Thomas, to achieve
22 a basic secondary education. Every school day, boys and girls take a bus to the ferry dock in Cruz
23 Bay, take the 7:00 AM ferry to Red Hook, and walk from the ferry dock to the Ivanna Eudora
24 Kean High School for classes. At the end of the day, they repeat this journey, but in reverse. This
25 is the responsibility placed on their young shoulders, rain or shine. St. John students have suffered
26 from lost exposure to extracurricular activities, difficulty with parental involvement at school,
27 episodes of tardiness, and, most concerning, the loss of interest for many in even completing their
28 high school education, achieving their diploma, and moving forward into higher education.

29 St. Johnian high school students have never had equity with their fellow highschoolers
30 from St. Thomas and St. Croix. Over the years, many St. Johnian children have chosen to migrate

31 to the islands of St. Thomas and even to the U.S. mainland to avoid the daily grind that is required
32 of them if they continue to reside on St. John.

33 In 1934, when the highest learning grade in St. John was sixth grade, Mr. Guy Benjamin
34 took it upon himself to find housing for students on St. Thomas that would be continuing their
35 educational pursuits, a practice that continues today for some students. In 1936, Julius Ebenezer
36 Sprauve Sr. began his lifelong fight for equal education for St. John students. As a member of the
37 First Municipal Council in 1937, through to the First Virgin Islands Legislature in 1954, he focused
38 on improving living conditions on St. John and fostered laws that authorized special scholarships
39 for St. Johnian students that traveled to St. Thomas for their education. When the stars align, you
40 are left with a moment worth remembering. Senators, that historic moment is now, and we must
41 not let it slip from our hands.

42 Looking back 50 years ago, St. John was a much different place. The roads were rough at
43 best; basic supplies such as bread, canned goods, and frozen meat might be found in Cruz Bay, but
44 St. Johnians did most of their provisioning by ferry across to St. Thomas. Caneel Bay was a quiet
45 resort, often cited as a place for “newlyweds and retirees.” The primary nightlife was a small bar
46 run by Duke Ellington at Gallows Point. Today, St. John is a bustling hub of activity, filled with
47 beautiful shops that carry cultural, artistic handcrafted items; waterside restaurants line the harbor
48 serving local fish dishes and soothing modern jazz and hip hop bands; and boasts about the St.
49 John Celebration, which is more intimate than any other local festival and has a wonderful cultural
50 flavor all its own. While the island socially has moved forward with the times, the educational
51 opportunities for residents have yet to advance.

52 In 2012, a letter from Assistant Secretary of the Interior Anthony Babauta requesting the
53 exchange of the Columbus Landing Site at Salt River Bay, St. Croix, Government of the Virgin
54 Islands (GVI) property, for the St. John Estate Catherineberg National Park Service (NPS) property
55 to construct a St. John school, spurred considerable discussion and research into equitable
56 properties for an exchange. The Government of the Virgin Islands and NPS have concurrent
57 jurisdiction over the Salt River site, and it was deemed politically untenable to exchange property
58 on St. Croix for a St. John-specific need. After extensive research by the GVI on other properties,
59 all on St. John, for consideration to include Mingo Cay, Congo Cay, Carval Rock, Perkins Cay,
60 Cinnamon Cay, Whistling Cay, Watermelon Cay, and Booby Rock, Whistling Cay was determined
61 to be the most viable property for exchange with the NPS.

62 For the GVI, Whistling Cay already lies completely within the Virgin Islands National Park
63 boundary, west of Mary Point Peninsula in Maho Bay Quarter. It is an undeveloped tropical forest
64 with no formalized access and one historic structure known as the "Custom House," recorded in a
65 Historic American Buildings Survey as HABS VI-87. It is zoned "P-Public" and is presently
66 designated a Wildlife Sanctuary for the protection of various animal and plant species, and is
67 therefore not subject to development.

68 For the NPS, the Catherineberg Property was donated to them in 1968 by the Bishop family.
69 This property has a history of 18th and 19th-century sugar production, with an animal mill,
70 oxpounds/animal pens, factory and cure house, rum still, and a village for enslaved laborers. The
71 Windmill at Catherineberg was constructed between 1800 and 1826.

72 Under the exchange, Whistling Cay will remain undeveloped and under preservation by
73 the National Park Service, with no changes in the current use, water and fishing rights, or
74 management strategy. It is important that I make clear --- no water rights, boat access, or fishing
75 rights are being exchanged or forfeited by the Government of the Virgin Islands in this transaction.
76 Whistling Cay already sits within National Park Service waters, as it has since the creation of the
77 national park. The real property exchange in no way affects water ownership, or changes to uses,
78 policies, or practices within the surrounding waters. Non-commercial fishing and subsistence
79 harvesting have been, and will remain, allowed and unaffected by the land exchange. Those
80 policies and practices for fishing and water use were Congressionally authorized under 36 CFR
81 Chapter 1, Parts 1-7 and may be found in the National Park Service Compendium located online
82 at <https://www.nps.gov/viis/learn/management/compendium.htm>. Whatever rights you have
83 today in navigating the waters around Whistling Cay will not change, as this is a land exchange,
84 not a water exchange.

85 Under the exchange, Estate Catherineberg will have its cultural resources, cultural
86 landscape, and historic buildings and structures surveyed, and will have an interpretation plan
87 developed by DPNR's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The SHPO has already received
88 a funding award from the Department of Interior's Office of Insular Affairs to begin this work.
89 Within five years of the exchange being executed, the property will be listed in the National
90 Register of Historic Places, and held in trust under the Division of Territorial Parks and Protected
91 Areas. It is fully anticipated that the unique history of the Estate Catherineberg property and its

92 cultural value will be incorporated into the New Julius E. Sprauve preK-12 school for the mutual
93 benefit of the students and community members.

94 Based on the appraisals conducted, there is an additional \$210,000 to be made payable to
95 the Government of the Virgin Islands upon closing to establish an even exchange of value. The
96 legislation before this body requests that those funds be appropriated to the St. John Capital
97 Improvement Fund exclusively for capital improvement projects on the island of St. John.

98 The children of St. Croix have a choice of two different public high schools each with
99 unique traditions and school spirit. The children of St. Thomas also have a choice of two public
100 high schools with distinguished histories and campus culture. The children of currently have no
101 such choice. The Sprauve preK-12 school will be a unique opportunity for the students of St. John,
102 and St. Thomas as well, to attend school in the natural and cultural environments of a National
103 Park. The facility will consist of five buildings centered on a watershed feature which will be
104 developed to highlight the natural environment in which it is being built. The buildings will have
105 a series of walkways allowing easy campus access. Sustainability features will be incorporated
106 into the construction to include photovoltaics and rainwater collection, adding an environmentally
107 responsible element to the school. The convenient location of the Estate Catherineberg property
108 allows the positioning of a school accessible to both primary town centers of Cruz Bay and Coral
109 Bay.

110 The Department of Education is particularly excited by the opportunity to establish the
111 Sprauve preK-12 as a magnet school. There is a wonderful potential to offer a magnet program
112 with a specialized focus on fine arts and music. We are also interested in exploring the
113 development of an environmental engineering and science program in conjunction with the
114 National Park. The proper design of a modern campus with the necessary ancilliary supports would
115 greatly facilitate the development of these programs, thereby offering unique academic
116 opportunities for children from both St. Thomas and St. John.

117 For the community, this facility will serve the people of St. John not only as a school but
118 it will also provide a hurricane shelter, a meeting space for public assemblies, and provide athletic
119 facilities for various sporting events. The Adrian Senior Center is currently the only public
120 hurricane shelter on the island of St. John and has a maximum capacity of 15 individuals. The
121 gymnasium of the new Sprauve preK-12 is being designed to serve as a hardened hurricane shelter
122 during emergencies and will be able to comfortably house over a 100 individuals. During its

123 normal operations that gymnasium will provide St. John with opportunity to host indoor sporting
124 competitions including basketball, volleyball, gymnastics, and badminton to name a few. The
125 school will also include an auditorium that will allow for large indoor assemblies within air-
126 conditioned comfort. These can include concerts, community meetings, and of course school
127 programs.

128 Following the two Category 5 hurricanes of 2017, a temporary modular campus was built
129 on the adjacent field to the Julius E. Sprauve School in Cruz Bay. Through the Office of Disaster
130 Recovery, the Virgin Islands Department of Education has authorization to FEMA disaster public
131 assistance funds to replace the school to meet current and future demands. It is important to note
132 that we are not merely designing a school to replace what was there, but to accommodate St. John's
133 population and needs at least 40 years from now.

134 The VIDE established the "New Schools Construction Advisory Board" to provide
135 recommendations for the future capital needs of V.I. Public Schools, including Sprauve School.
136 The V.I. Department of Education embarked on an 18-month planning process that included 26
137 meetings, five (5) community meetings, and public meetings on the plan held virtually (due to
138 COVID), which included a meeting with the members of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands.
139 The Bryan/Roach Administration approved the Facilities Master plan in June 2020. It included
140 the development of industry standards with local members and national leaders of the American
141 Institute of Architects that FEMA approved. To ensure that the community had input in the design
142 of the new school, we hosted two charrettes with the community. Those were held at this same
143 legislative hall on October 16, 2019, and February 4, 2020. Based on those recommendations and
144 the programming requirements for this new space, we created a schematic design for the Estate
145 Catherineberg parcel. Currently, 30% of the design is completed, which are the bridging
146 documents. We are in the midst of negotiating the FEMA fixed cost offer, running concurrently
147 with the property acquisition. Once the exchange is finalized, we can solicit a design-build firm to
148 complete the design and construct the new school. This will be a historic moment for the
149 community and the VIDE. Upon completion of this new school campusit will be the largest
150 investment in public infrastructure on the island of St. John ever.

151 After the New Julius E. Sprauve preK-12 school has been built and opened on the land in
152 Estate Catherineberg, St. John, the Cruz Bay campus buildings can be removed, and the property
153 repurposed for suitable public/private development with the proceeds earmarked for exclusive use

154 by VIDE to maintain the New Sprauve K-12 school. The property could also house a government
155 office complex and allow for consolidation of local government services in Cruz Bay. Based on
156 the recent public meetings held in St John, several proposals have been presented to the community
157 as options for future development, including removing the field from the downtown area. Julius
158 E. Sprauve School, nonetheless, has outgrown the downtown area, and the expansion is necessary
159 so that, for the first time, our children and their families will have a choice, which has been long
160 overdue.

161 Under federal law (54 U.S.C. §102901), the National Park Service has no legal authority
162 to donate or sell land to the Virgin Islands Government or anyone. The Secretary of Interior is
163 authorized to exchange lands within the National Parks in that same statute. The federal land must
164 be approximately equal in value to the exchanged land being considered. Whistling Cay and Estate
165 Catherineberg have similar property values. For the exchange of real property, the NPS and the
166 GVI must demonstrate through appraisals that the properties are similar in value, and if one value
167 is appraised higher than the other, cash may be added to equalize the values, as was done in this
168 instance. The acreage of each property is not as significant as the value equalization, and other
169 issues which affect the difference in values are the developmental rights or restrictions on the
170 properties. As a practical matter, Whistling Cay has little anticipated future value beyond its
171 current use. It should be noted that in the 1980s, Whistling Cay was designated by NOAA and
172 DPNR as a Wildlife Protected Sanctuary and is regulated under 12 VIC 106 as non-developable.
173 The Government of the Virgin Islands has no plans or intentions to ever develop that property. On
174 the other hand, the Estate Catherineberg property contains buildable acreage that will facilitate
175 infrastructure development that could easily approach \$100 million in built value. We are
176 exchanging a piece of non-developable property with limited access, for a centrally located
177 property, with striking natural settings, in a beautiful historic environment, that will be developed
178 into a modern school campus in which to teach our children.

179 Regarding a lease, the GVI is not asking the NPS for a lease; the FEMA disaster funds
180 cannot be used to build the new school on leased property; and 36 CFR Part 18 renders vacant land
181 (such as land not associated with a building for lease) to be ineligible for consideration of leasing
182 by the NPS under federal law.

183 As it relates to questions regarding the 1917 Convention between the United States and
184 ownership of Whistling Cay, the treaty ceded property to the United States of America, not the

185 inhabitants of the Virgin Islands, and current title commitment states that fee simple title for
186 Whistling Cay, Tract 02-101, is vested in the Government of the Virgin Islands by virtue of the
187 Revised Organic Act of 1954 (Act of Congress, July 22, 1954, Chapter 558, 68 Stat. 497).

188 As it relates to the deed for the Estate Catherineberg Property (Tract 01-137A), fee simple
189 title is vested in the United States of America pursuant to the deed dated October 3, 1968, from
190 Ethel May Bishop, which was conveyed with clauses for exceptions to future use of the parcel
191 which restrict the development of topographical changes except as may be approved in writing by
192 the Secretary of Interior or his authorized representative. The deed provided rights to Ethel Bishop
193 for the continued, limited use of the land for the remainder of her life. The deed does not express
194 any use or benefit to any other entity.

195 Over the past 50 years, through at least two generations of St. Johnian families, through
196 seven elected Governors, five Delegates to Congress, and twenty-six (26) sitting Legislatures of
197 the Virgin Islands, we have pursued the issue of how to expand educational opportunities for the
198 island of St. John. The logistical challenges for secondary education for residents of St. John are
199 deterring students from fully pursuing their preK-12 education to the greatest extent possible.
200 Many distractions already derail students on their way to achieving a high school diploma; this
201 frankly does not need to be one. It is time that we make our children our number one priority. Our
202 children, our future, deserve this opportunity. A delay in this process means a delay in making
203 this dream for the children of St. John a reality. We must ensure that we are not campaigning on
204 the backs of our children and letting a few individuals today decide for the many children of the
205 future. Our St. John children deserve the best opportunities they can receive and that begins with
206 a quality education, equal to that of every other student in the Virgin Islands. The decision you
207 make today is not for us—it is specifically for the students of the future. Every day counts, and
208 going back to the drawing board means starting from scratch, impacting the realization of this
209 vision for St. John.

210 Senators, the stars are aligned... the funding is in place, the property is available, the need
211 is overwhelming, and the opportunity to create the historic moment is upon us. With your
212 favorable approval of this legislation today, we can create the history together that ensures that
213 this will be the last generation of St. Johnian children to endure these challenges. We stand ready
214 to answer any questions you may have.