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Committee of the Whole Hearing  
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Good Day, Senate President Novelle Francis Jr, Members of the Committee of the Whole, and my fellow Virgin Islanders. I appreciate having the opportunity to give testimony regarding the proposed land exchange between the National Park Service and the Government of the Virgin Islands for the establishment of a K-12 school on the island of St. John.

I am Dr. Hadiya Sewer, the President and Co-Founder of St.JanCo: the St. John Heritage Collective, a land rights and cultural heritage preservation nonprofit on St. John. I come to you today as a scholar, an entrepreneur, a community organizer, and most importantly as a mother. I birthed two young St. Johnians who are currently 5 & 8 years old and I care deeply about the wellbeing of all of our young people and our community as a whole.

Bearing and raising children on St. John is no easy task. There is no hospital to safely birth our children in. For most of my children's lives, the public library has been shut, and inaccessible. Many of our children endured the devastating 2017 Hurricane Season. Others were born and raised in the wake of the storms and the covid-19 pandemic. The percentage of children living in poverty in the Virgin Islands is higher than the national average. When we look at the 2021 Academic Assessment results for the Virgin Islands, we recognize that we have a great deal of work to do to improve our students' proficiency in key subjects. For example, 91% of our 8th graders in the territory were not proficient in Math in 2021.

We grow up wondering whether there is a future for us here in the Virgin Islands or whether our futures will be brighter if we move to the U.S. mainland. Every single day, we make the best of the resources that we have access to and wish that we had more options, better options for our children's education. We don't want them to commute like we did.

So, believe me when I say that no one wants a K-12 public school on St. John more than the people of St. John. Studies show that commutes can have an adverse impact on health and students' performance. For parents, it can be a bit cumbersome to navigate getting time off from work to attend parent teacher conferences on St. Thomas if you are living and working on St. John. Therefore, we recognize that a school on St. John is essential to securing the future of St. John's children and improving the quality of life of St. John's residents.

We share Governor Bryan's excitement regarding the possibility of finally making a K-12 public school on St. John a reality after experiencing, what our governor called, "half a century of setbacks and obstacles."

Yet, we must insist that the Government of the Virgin Islands explore alternative means of acquiring the land. The Virgin Islands National Park already occupies over two thirds of the island of St. John. In many ways, the Park's presence illustrates the colonial and inequitable power dynamics that exist between Virgin Islanders and the federal government. When you read the work of Drs. Crystal Fortwangler, Jessica Samuel, Karen Fog Olwig, and myself, one starts to recognize that the Park has contributed to key socio-political shifts on St. John— namely, the decline of farming and subsistence living on St. John, the island's real estate boom, cultural erasure, the rise of tourism and the VI's subsequent dependency on tourism, via the establishment of what Dr. Crystal Fortwangler calls, "Park Island," a leisure oriented economy that prioritizes tourist's experience on island over the wellbeing and self-determination of the islands' long term residents and ancestral people.

For decades, Virgin Islanders advocated for the establishment of a school.

In 2008, former Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen told the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Insular Affairs in the House, "despite the hard work and dedication of the administrators and teachers at the school, not only is the (current) environment not conducive to education, but it is extremely unsafe (Christensen in Mann 2009)." Former Congresswoman Christiansen submitted bill, H.R. 53, The V.I. National Park School Lease Act, which would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to enter a lease agreement with the Government of the Virgin Islands for the establishment of a public school on St. John. On October 10th, 2007, the Committee on Resources unanimously approved the V.I. National Park School Lease Act and sent it before the full House for consideration. The bill passed the House and subsequently died in the Senate.

The V.I. National Park School Lease Act died, in part, because several of the properties in nearby Estate Catherineberg were owned by wealthier individuals from the US mainland who were concerned that the children's presence could lower their property values. They contacted their state representatives to urge them to vote against the bill. HR 53's trajectory shows one overt example of how race, property value, and colonialism manifest to create a scenario where the "colonized wants to move forward and the colonizer holds things back," to quote Aime Cesaire.

Given this history, it is disingenuous to imply that the people of St. John are merely being hard headed when they oppose the land swap.

We understand that the National Park and FEMA have stipulations in place that make the lease a non viable option. However, those who oppose the land swap are carefully calculating the impact

of a long history of dispossession and displacement and saying that enough is enough. We would like to see GVI fully explore the option of having a private entity donate land for the establishment of the school.

We agree that we want a K-12 school on St. John. We recognize that a great deal of labor and advocacy have gone into establishing a school on St. John and that we now have funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to make a K-12 public school on St. John a reality. In many ways, this is the very reality that Virgin Islanders spent many years fighting and laboring for.

However, this particular legislation leads us to believe that we must choose between our land and our children's future. Those of us who oppose the land swap do so because we know that this is a false choice. Every day we ask ourselves whether our children will have a viable future on our island.

We know that as Malcolm X said in 1963, "land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality." So, we do not give up land easily.

As territorial inhabitants, ie, as colonized people we are very aware that our islands are a possession, and that we exist under the plenary power of Congress. In a piece in the BVI Beacon, one of our brothers in the BVI, Dr. Richard Georges, wrote, "What Virgin Islanders know by these facts is that the land they inhabit — the land in which they were born, the land in which they and their ancestors have labored — is not theirs. This is a truth we know in the depths of our beings..."

In many ways, we are in a predicament where our colonial relationship with the U.S. has severely limited many of the options that we consider to be reasonable – namely the Park donating the land or leasing it to the people of the Virgin Islands for the establishment of a school. Instead of placing the blame squarely on the colonial power we are blaming our elders and activists for daring to have imaginations that are capacious enough to believe that we can have a quality school for our children without giving land in exchange to the Park system.