

Testimony before the Committee of the Whole  
July 11, 2023  
Cruz Bay, St. John, Virgin Islands

Good Afternoon President Novelle Francis, members of the 35<sup>th</sup> Legislature, viewing and listening audience. I am Almando “Rocky” Liburd and I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this most important subject today. A subject that has been talked about for so many years. I was born in Cruz Bay and grew up in Eden, Coral Bay. I attended the Benjamin Franklin school now the Guy Benjamin school, then Julius Sprauve school and then Charlotte Amalie high school.

My school day began daily around 5 AM and ended around 5PM when I would return home. I say this to say that I am not speaking about something I heard about but rather from what I have experienced. I think it will be difficult to find someone who doesn't support education. So let's analyze this issue; I want to start with the National Park who represents a major part of the economic development for the island of St. John. If the truth be told, many tourists come here because of the excellent job the National Park Service have done in protecting and maintaining our pristine environment for residents and visitors alike. It is one of the main reasons why our tourist numbers for the island of St. John continue to remain high year after year. The National Park Service also hold the key to our economic development. Part of that development will come from the construction of a new high school which will bring with it employment and also if Caneel Bay, which have been the largest employer for years is able to resume operations within the park and provide hundreds of jobs once again for the people on St. John.

Should we have to swap land to educate our people; my personal feeling is no. However, Whistling Cay is an island of roughly 15 acres where no one resides. This property that is up for the exchange of a school does not in any way affect the quality of life for St. John residents. In fact, in August of 2006, the then Governor Charles W. Turnbull entered into discussion with the Secretary of Interior at that time, Dirk Kempthorne. It was Governor Turnbull who proposed a land exchange where the Government would receive land within the St. John National Park in exchange for several cays off St. John.

As I look at this swap deal, I wish that a cadre of elected officials to include the Governor, Delegate to Congress and Senators would have had the insight to discuss this issue with the sitting President of the United States since he frequently visits the VI. I also hoped that the group known to us as The Friends of the Park would have taken a position of giving the land for a school since they are a strong lobbying body in congress. After all, St. Johnians needs some friends too, just like the park. But considering what is being said about us in recent days and months across the various media sources, we also have to keep in mind the present climate of Washington, DC. We are dealing with a body that is against abortion rights and affirmative action. Let us not forget that we have also been fighting for years to make our rum cover over permanent and for the increase in medicare and Medicaid. So if they are ready to act on this matter in the very near future, I am in favor of this land swap.

St. Johnians are tired of waiting for this long awaited promised high school. As a youngster who wanted to play sports and be involved in certain school clubs, I could not participate because I had to worry about traversing that long trek back

home to St. John. It has been 53 years since I graduated, and the people of St. John have complained about many things throughout the years, but today I pray that the lack of a high school could one day be a thing of the past.

As you deliberate on the bill before you, I encourage each of you to put it through the Rotary four way test: Is the swap the truth?, Is the swap fair to all concerned?, Will the swap build good will and better friendships?, and Will the swap be beneficial to all concerned? I believe the answer is a resounding yes. And remember, don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.