

July 6, 2023

TESTIMONY

RE: Land Exchange Between the National Park Service and the Government of the Virgin Islands

Honorable Novelle E. Francis, President, Thirty-Fifth Legislature of the Virgin Islands; other Honorable Senators of this august body, listening and viewing audiences', ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. I am Yvonne Wells, mother of the Commissioner of Education, Dionne Wells-Hedrington. I am speaking as a former educator and proponent for public education and **not** as Commissioner Wells-Hedrington's mother.

Thanks very much for granting me this opportunity to address you regarding the Proposed Bill for the Land Swap between the Government of the V. I. and the National Park Service.

Let me begin by stating that public education for the people of St. John has been challenging over the last 70 years plus/minus and beyond. During my mother's growing up on this island, few youngsters were educated beyond the 6th grade. The more affluent residents: though few, were able to send their children to Antigua to advance their education. Children walked for miles to get to school. If you wanted your child to get a high school education, you had to pay for room and board in private homes for your child to get to go to high school. Before the inception of the Julius E. Sprauve School, children had to commute to CAHS from grade 8. Then as time moved on Sprauve School went to the 9th grade, making the transition to St. Thomas for high school more palpable. However, our children were always at a disadvantage in being able to participate in extracurricular activities. Transportation was a major factor and the further out you lived the more difficulty was experienced. Julius Sprauve School is in the heart of Cruz Bay with all the commercial activity and surrounded by bars and restaurants.

In recent years those who live in the East End/John's Folly/Mandahl/Coral Bay communities have had to be up and get ready to meet the bus at 6 a.m. Returning home close to 6 pm; easy 12-hour days. All this with no ability to participate in extra curricula activities and little time to study before having to get ready for the next day and its ordeal.

If my mind serves me correctly, plans for a comprehensive educational complex were worked on during the Turnbull Administration, when Mr. Gaylord Sprauve was Superintendent of schools and Mr. Julien Harley was administrator. The vision was similar. Catherineberg was the proposed sight, and the National Park was not in agreement. However, the current plan is much more comprehensive.

Nothing should come between our children and their education. But like everything else, there is good and bad in everything. The National Park has brought great

recognition to St. John, worldwide. It has helped in the preservation of our beaches and historical sights. Most, if not all the land owned by the park slipped through the hands of our elders directly or indirectly. It's just what it is; **reality!** However, its unconscionable to now be faced with the reality that the Park, having such an abundance of land, is by no means willing to give land back to the community for building a school. What's the word? **They are not in the business of doing that!**

Building a school should be our number one priority. Ideally, it would have been great for the Park Service to gift the Catherineberg Estate to the local government, free of encumbrances, in lieu of swapping Whistling Cay.

I agree with the statement in the draft bill in reference to the student involvement. Those of us who are believers continue to affirm that all things work together for the good of those who believe and as such, we look for good in every situation. Irma and caused major devastation in our islands. The good that came out of the situation has been the opportunity for us here in the territory to get the needed funding to replace and renovate our existing outdated facilities to adequately provide the learning environments needed for our children to become equal to others throughout the United States. We have the opportunity of a lifetime!

I have heard it said that we don't have the numbers to warrant a high school, I beg to differ. We need to plan with vision for future growth. In addition, it is past time that St. Thomas-St. John being a district, operate in like manner, not only when it's convenient for some. Schools in this district should offer all the disciplines/career paths and students should be able to attend where their interests are i.e., sciences, technology, fine arts, vocational etc. St. John **MUST** have its own public school. Many private schools just cater to the brightest and the best. Students with special needs are not desired by their standards. No school on St. John should be allowed to take on the education of the masses.

I have heard is said, 'Make Giff Hill School, the high school. Make it the Charter School for St. John. I vehemently oppose that idea! No Way! Private schools can operate on St. John, however, we need Government-run public school on St. John.

Many are up in arms regarding the swap of Whistling Cay for the Catherineberg site because the park should not own any more property. I get it! But, if all aspects were explored and there is no other way, we cannot continue to deny our children the future construction of a 21st Century facility for a school. Our children should not be made pawns in this equation. The irony about it all is that we were in a deep sleep and a quake jolted us. So, suddenly, we jumped up and realized that we needed to save Whistling Cay, no more land for the park.

A major concern I had with the swap was ownership of the waters surrounding Whistling Cay. I dreaded the park's usual restrictions relative to the surrounding waters that they control. Having heard that the park is ready to turn over the water ways surrounding the island, I was relieved because I was concerned about guaranteeing the local fishermen access to continue fishing in and around the area. In my estimation, that was a major win in the proposal.

Legislators, we need to put aside our own picayune differences. In my humble estimation, it appears that the Honorable Governor, Albert Bryan in his eagerness to get things moving, may have by-passed your body and went ahead and established parameters on behalf of the community. Granted he may have overstepped his boundary, I implore you to put aside the politics, chastise him for his atrocity if you must, but do not let it cause us to lose sight of our need to begin the process to get a well needed school for the children of St. John. **TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE!**

Thanks for your indulgence,

Yvonne Wells

Yvonne Wells
Retired Educator