March 8, 2021

Honorable Janelle Sarauw
Committee on Disaster Recovery
34th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Good Morning Honorable Janelle Sarauw, Senators, fellow testifiers and listening public.

My name Ian Samuel and I am the Co-chair of the St. John Long Term Recovery Group. With me today is Jon Eichner who is also a Co-chair of the organization. We are here today to discuss the Long Term outlook for the development of St. John and the challenges we face with the current state of DPNR.

As we all know St. John was devastated from the storms of 2017 and has been working extremely hard to get life back to a new normal that includes resiliency. As the smallest of the Virgin Islands, St. John was very fortunate to have the support of the private residents and lovers of the island who raised millions of dollars to help the most vulnerable residents recover from the devastation of Irma.

This organization decided to create a housing program with the help of other Non-Profits to help rebuild 40 of our most vulnerable residents’ homes. These residents mostly consisted of seniors and low income families. Please understand the cost to insure a home on St. John is 3-4 percent of the replacement value of the home, which makes acquiring a policy, nearly impossible for the majority of our residents.

We depend on DPNR to create and enforce the codes that will allow us to be more resilient and prepared the handle the type of storms that we experience. When we have to spend private dollars to correct something that we depend on DPNR, to include A&E and construction, it takes away resources to address some of the longstanding titling challenges our residents face.

In 2018, we applied for a Wind Retro-fit Hazzard Mitigation Grant Program. In 2020, we were awarded 7.8 million dollars to complete the Hazzard Mitigation Grant which would enable us to fix the roofs, windows and doors of 97 homes on St. John. With the combination of the Resilient Housing Initiative and the other programs to include SBA loans and the Step Program, our goal was to create a true Public-Private partnership that would provide our most vulnerable residents with resilient homes.

As we continue to Engineer the homes for the program, we are finding engineering and construction that is not to code and the cost to correct is very costly. We are not here to point fingers, we are simply here to identify issues that will continue to plague us if we don’t acknowledge and correct them.

In our slides you will see examples of these concerns. Warning: these photos are alarming. Senator Johnson came with us on a tour of the island and was able to see first-hand, the impact this lack of oversight by DPNR has on St. John as a whole. I am sure that senator Johnson can attest that the pictures that you are about to see are far worse in person.
We as Tax payers depend on our government to create systems that protect us; not exploit us. We have been notified that plans are ready to be picked up and upon arrival, we are told the cashier left for the day or they can't find the plans. As you can imagine with no services on St. John and the challenges of COVID 19; the added cost of making multiple trips for the same thing is challenging and frustrating.

When you allow people to take advantage of loopholes in the system it becomes a dynamic of survival of the fittest. So we simply ask what can we do to further assist in leveling the playing field so that the next generation of St. Johnians have a fighting chance of residential security and success?

I stand ready to answer any questions you may have.

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