

Statement before the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs on H.R. 53

I am Gaylord A Sprauve. I am a resident of the U.S. Virgin Islands with long established family relationships on the island of St. John. As a youngster and later as a teenager, I was privileged to be in the company of my siblings and other relatives as we roamed across the landscape hunting and collecting bait for fishing around the islands and cays that surround the main island of St. John. We enjoyed the land and we enjoyed the sea. We did this before there was ever a National Park in our midst and we enjoyed our experiences without restrictions other than those that were self-imposed. Though not schooled in the science or art of conservation or preservation, we employed our own sense of what amounted to appropriate behavior in the treatment and care, of our ecology. We did so keeping in mind that others would follow in our footsteps who would want to enjoy the same precious experiences that were ours. Those happy, joyful, pleasant memories remain in my consciousness today!

In the mid 1950s, we realized that a National Park would come to St. John. With limited or no experience with the introduction of such an endeavor, many of us witnessed, while standing silently on the sideline as our cultural upbringing dictated, as senior heads of our families sold off their lands for the purpose of what would become the Virgin Islands National Park. Little did the senior heads of our families and even those of us coming of age realized what the creation of a National Park on St. John entailed and what it meant for the future of the homeland. St. John was soon rediscovered and over time was transformed forever into what it is today-with a scarcity of affordable land for the resident population to build individual homes or adequate land reserves by the government for important public programs and services.

H.R. 53 as proposed by Delegate Christensen is an acknowledgement of the contention that our leaders failed to plan adequately for the future needs of our school-aged population and the larger St. John community. H.R. 53 attempts to address the most vexing problem of acquiring a site upon which to construct an educational and cultural complex that would satisfy not only the immediate need of moving the school or schools, but also, the future needs of St. John as envisioned by the people of St. John, in consultation with their government leaders.

Conceptually, I support this major step by the Delegate. The land lease that H.R. 53 proposes is the third option of those that I suggested in an August 7, 2006 Guest Opinion in our local Daily News, following a public announcement that the then, Governor Charles Turnbull was proposing a land swap with the Virgin Islands National Park that included several of St. John cays.

In my rebuttal to the Governor's proposed land swap, I called his announcement premature and suggested that we seek congressional assistance with our plight in the form of an outright grant of the acreage required to accomplish the desired purposes of such a grant. Secondly, I suggested a use permit for a number of years and possibly on into perpetuity. The lease option, the subject of H.R. 53 was my third option. I hope that the option approved by Congress will be one for no more than a nominal fee and therefore, economically practical for the local government.

Once again, I take this opportunity to commend Delegate Christensen for her leadership and vision on this matter.