

Good Evening to Delegate Christensen, the members of the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, staff and all the concerned St. Johnians gathered here for this important hearing.

My name is Carmen Wesselhoft and I am the Virgin Islands Senator-At-Large. This is my first term in office and I was sworn in on January 8 of this year. Although I represent constituents throughout the Territory, I am a proud native born St. Johnian and I am especially concerned about St. John issues and the pressing need for a new school.

I am very pleased that we are going forward on this issue today as we truly must all work together to see the construction of this new school through. Thanks to Delegate Christensen's Office and all those involved in organizing this meeting.

The need to relocate Julius Sprauve School is clear to all of us. As is the need for a high school here on St. John. The school was once conveniently located at the center of town, but now that the town of Cruz Bay has grown exponentially it is no longer an optimal location for students. It is noisy, there is no room for expansion, little parking and there are danger zones all around campus. Just this March a truck lost it breaks and rammed a car into the school's crosswalk, ending up hanging over the school's ballfield. There is a great deal of traffic surrounding the school on all sides. We have heavy drinking taking place just across the street from morning until night. It is not an environment that is especially conducive to learning.

I would like to see a new school include both a high school and some kind of vocational training program. We do have a high school on St. John, but it is a private school and tuition is out of the reach for most residents. Students drop out every year partly because of the frustration of traveling to St. Thomas each day for their classes. Good students are motivated to make the trip, but it doesn't take much to discourage those young people already at risk.

Construction of a new school would allow the Virgin Islands Government to reassign the property at Sprauve School for other purposes. Our need for a fire station is well known, as is the lack of youth and senior centers. We are also in need of a centrally located Government complex. Land on St. John is certainly at a premium and I will push for the campus to continue to be used for the greater public good.

I wholeheartedly support the good intentions behind H.R. 53, but I do have some concerns.

The information I was provided with did not provide specific information as to the plot size and location of the land in question and I am hoping this will be addressed in the course of this hearing.

The question that many St. Johnians are asking is whether or not there is some legal reason why we must lease this land from the Federal Government? Why can't this land be given outright to the people of the St. John? What purpose does a 90 year lease serve?

Construction of a new school has been stymied by the lack of available and affordable land on St. John, but so has construction of affordable housing, a nursing home, a fire station and recreational facilities for our young people. The skyrocketing cost of property on St. John and this has put home ownership out of the reach of many, if not most, young St. Johnians.

No matter how flexible the terms or low the interest rate may be, no one making \$33,000 a year – and that is about what the average Virgin Islander earns -- can afford a mortgage on a million dollar home. Prices do go up and property values will increase, but local salaries have not risen to match the rise in prices of homes and land on St. John. Prices have primarily been driven up by outside investors who have made their money elsewhere. There is a growing gap between the haves and the have nots here on St. John and, at this point, the Federal Government is the only entity with the power and the land to ameliorate some of these concerns.

We as a community have attempted to respond by creating affordable housing opportunities at Bellevue and soon at Calabash Boom. This is not enough. And I do not think our people should be relegated to solely living in “affordable housing communities”. They should have the opportunity to purchase land at a reasonable price and to build a home of their own preference and style.

There are those newcomers among us who have been heard to say that if St. Johnians cannot afford to live on St. John, they should move to St. Croix or St. Thomas. This is insulting and unacceptable. Our families are being broken apart. Our culture and our traditions lost.

Some change is inevitable and there is certainly a new “culture” being developed here on St. John, but it is time we took some significant steps towards making homeownership more feasible. The most significant step we could take and, the only real remedy at this point, is for the Virgin Islands National Park to transfer some land back to the people of this Territory.

I love the park, it has been a tremendous blessing in terms of keeping our island serene and beautiful. I can not imagine St. John without the park and the significant land it protects. It has been a tremendous tourist attraction and has created many jobs and opportunities for Virgin Islanders. St. John is the gem of the Caribbean, largely because of the National Park.

But there is always a flipside. All those people coming from outside that fell in love with the beauty of the park have driven up real estate prices. All the land held by the park has made little available for growth. All those tourists have altered our way and quality of life.

When Rockefeller created what is now known as the Virgin Islands National Park he said that it was never to create a hardship for the people of St. John. Well today it has created

a hardship in terms of lack of land for a school, for a new basketball court, for a fire station, for a senior center, for housing and for homeownership for local families.

The National Park owns 2/3s of St. John or approximately 9,000 acres. If even just two hundred of these acres were returned to the people of St. John, we could greatly relieve this hardship for decades to come.

I know that some may find this idea controversial, but what is the alternative? I propose that this Committee undertake a feasibility study in this regard. The park is bringing in hundreds of thousands of visitors, yet there is not adequate land available to host the services and employees needed to serve these guests. A detailed plan would have to be crafted whereby established families would have first opportunity to purchase this land and be required to hold on to it for a specified number of years. It wouldn't be easy, but it can be done.

When the National Park was created Virgin Islanders did not have a strong voice in national affairs and there was certainly a different standard in terms of racial relations and politics back in 1956. Things have changed in the world, things have changed on St. John and it is time that we demand that changes are made to better accommodate our people.

Just a couple of hundred acres out of over 9,000 could make all the difference in the world to young St. Johnians and those older St. Johnians who would like to return home, but can not. I am confident we could do this without jeopardizing the beauty or ecology of the Virgin Islands National Park.

If we do not take steps to make land available for infrastructural improvements and homeownership now and work towards building and stabilizing our shrinking middle class, I truly fear for the future of St. John. No one is immune from the social and economic crisis being created here.

We must make our voices heard in Washington. If we all unite I am confident we can find creative ways to resolve the lack of developable land, without further disenfranchising St. Johnians.

I truly hope that you will take my words under consideration. I know that untold numbers share my sentiments and I hope we can move forward in giving back a small portion of land to St. Johnians.

I ask that Committee members support any efforts to assist in the construction of a new school on St. John and I stand ready to offer any local legislation that may be necessary to facilitate this process.

Thank you.

