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Hearing Focuses on Water Island Dock, St. Thomas Growth Plans

Floating dock and urban projects highlight economic development outlook in St. Thomas and Water Island

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Aerial view of the proposed construction site for a floating dock on Water Island, demarcated by a highlighted area on the turquoise waters adjacent to the beach, indicating the space cleared and measured for the installation. By. SCREENSHOT/VI CONSORTIUM

It was “economic development day” in the 35th Legislature, as dubbed by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory regarding the series of rezoning requests brought before the Committee of the Whole on Monday. The measures were supported by representatives of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources and Coastal Zone Management.

The first was Bill 35-0212, which if ratified would allow for the “use and occupancy of submerged lands...and for the installation of a 5-foot wide by 30-foot long floating dock anchored by a 4-foot wide by 24-foot wooden walkway” on Honeymoon Beach on Water Island. Marlon Hibbert, director of the Division of Coastal Zone Management, assured concerned lawmakers that the installation and subsequent removal during adverse weather conditions would have minimal environmental impact.

Lisa Bertrand, representing Beach Life LLC, informed lawmakers that installing the dock will create a “proper ingress and egress to vessels [and] a safe place for passengers to disembark and board.” She anticipates that it will also “alleviate the environmental damage from the constant anchoring and beaching of dinghies along the shoreline.” Use of the dock will come at no cost to boaters, Ms. Bertrand explained to lawmakers.

Next was BR 24-0973, which would grant a use variance to plots of land in Estate Contant in St. Thomas, currently being used as overflow parking for Discount Car Rentals. Having utilized the property for this purpose for the past decade, consultant and former senator Roosevelt David explained that the business was reportedly recently advised of their non-compliance with current zoning regulations, and has now sought a rezoning to allow for commercial purposes.

However, based largely on disagreement from neighboring property owners, DPNR recommended that a use variance was more suitable. A rezoning, explained DPNR’s representative, “could negatively impact the surrounding properties and will not be in conformity with the area’s character.” Mr. David, while noting that the property owners would accept the variance so as to come into compliance, argued that the land in question is “prime property” and an actual commercial rezoning would transform it into a “performing asset.”

The final request was captured under Bill 35-0235, which would amend the official zoning map to reconfigure Remainder Consolidated Parcel No. 1-39 Estate Donoe No. 2A New Quarter, St. Thomas from R4 Residential Medium Density to B3 Scattered. The applicant, AR Legacy LLC, intends to construct a mixed-use community with commercial and residential buildings. According to DPNR’s testimony, the project could take five phases, with the 18-month long first phase resulting in the development of commercial buildings.

Subsequently, residential property will be developed, “dependent on the market.” They anticipate 8-10 years to complete the entire project, as “it depends on how the financing comes through.” AR Legacy LLC believes that the total project could cost \$50 million.

In an explanation that excited Senator Marvin Blyen, AR Legacy LLC’s Akim Harris shared that they intend to construct “about 100 family residences whether it be in single-family homes, or possibly townhomes.” By developing the mixed-use community, the company hopes to “provide a better way of life” for Virgin Islanders. They are already in construction of the first 12 houses on an adjacent plot of land, with some homes close to 90% complete. There are eventual plans to convert it into a gated community.

Lawmakers will vote on the proposed rezoning and use variance applications in the next Legislative Session.