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Historic Hamilton Homestead on St. Croix Poised to Welcome Public

Preserving the Past: The Grave of Alexander Hamilton's Mother Among Estate's Historical Artifacts

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Great House in Estate La Grange once owned by Alexander Hamilton's aunt and uncle, James and Lynn Bratton. By. SERICORE VI.

A historically significant property could soon be open to the public for the first time in over a century, if lawmakers approve a zoning use variance for parcel 10 of Estate Grange, on which sits the great house owned by Alexander Hamilton's aunt and uncle, James and Lynn Bratton.

The 26-acre parcel was purchased by current owners Steve and Young Baker in 2021. "We lived in the property and the more we lived there, the more we realized we wanted to open the property

up...to the island,” Mr. Baker said. “It had been in the Armstrong trust for almost 100 years. And with that ownership, there was very little access granted to the property to the great house and the various historical artifacts that are on that. So we purchased another house and had hoped to open up the great house for events,” he continued. The property, Young Baker told lawmakers, is where the grave of Alexander Hamilton’s mother is located.

“This is a big treasure,” said Mrs. Baker, explaining why she and her husband decided that the property must be open to the public, prompting Senator Novelle Francis to muse that “the government may have missed an opportunity to actually acquire that property...and save it for the history of our people.”

The proposal that was presented to the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources several months ago, is to allow expansion in the first phase by hiring more employees, and opening the greenhouse as an event rental space. Then, a second phase would allow for the “research, development and testing of solar and wind technologies, as well as agricultural production and sales,” according to Leia LaPlace-Matthew, DPNR’s director of the Division of Comprehensive and Coastal Zone Planning.

The current R1 zoning limits operations to only one outside employee. Ms. LaPlace-Matthew noted that the proposed uses were not compatible with the current zoning, but told lawmakers that the requested R3 zoning would not be appropriate for the area, which is predominantly low-density residential. DPNR’s recommendation was for variances to be granted to the plot as currently zoned, to allow for the proposed commercial activity. There had been no opposition to this proposal from the public, Ms. LaPlace-Matthew noted, and in fact DPNR received several letters in support of the project following public hearings.

“The overarching goal is to generate an economic ecosystem where we're building stuff with Island labor, we can export it, we can use that labor to build or grow goods that benefit the island,” Mr. Baker said, explaining that profits from the various economic components of the proposal would help to support the continued upkeep of the historical buildings and site.

Seed funding for the project comes from his current business, Sericore VI. “I own a company, we manufacture devices for emergency response, both federal, military, state and local governments,” he told lawmakers.

Apart from moving some assembly of those devices to St. Croix, Mr. Baker also plans on assembling cost-effective power kits for households and businesses, run on solar and wind energy sources. This would help to “create good paying jobs and have more [of a] manufacturing base there on island,” Mr. Baker said.

Mr. Baker said that because it is a self-funded project, construction may take up to eight years for it to be completed. Phase one would be getting the agricultural component up and running. “All of that investigation, tailoring, tuning and getting a self-sustainable agriculture building is a two-to-three year project,” said Mr. Baker, estimating a cost of between \$250,000 and \$400,000 for that part of the plan. Phase two, the power kit assembly, would take “at least another three to four years.”

Agriculture would be in the form of high-yield aquaponics towers, Mr. Baker disclosed. Crops grown would include common garden herbs and vegetables. In response to a question from Senator Marise James, he disclosed that cannabis is precluded from his plan because of his other work with government entities.

The project also includes plans for some short-term accommodation for guests staying for events, training, or just to experience the property. In the final stages of the project, Mr. Baker says, there are plans to include a unique live-work space for “artisans, metal workers, wood workers...that’s a conceptual idea,” he noted.

Mr. Baker said the intention was to spread the development across all 26 acres of the property. “There’s no attempt or no inclination to build anything in mass,” he told Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger. “I would suspect 80, 90 percent of the property would be green space,” Mr. Baker said, responding to an inquiry from Mr. Francis.

The property’s historical nature was also a matter of concern for lawmakers, who were told that there would be archaeological surveys conducted next May by students of the University of Tulsa. These surveys, said Ms. LaPlace-Matthews, are required ahead of any potential earthwork taking place. She also informed lawmakers that DPNR officials have met with the territory’s State Historic Preservation Office regarding the proposal.

Lawmakers seemed amenable to the proposal before them, with several promising to vote in favor of the project during the Senate’s next legislative session. Offered an opportunity to make closing remarks, Mr. Baker vowed to be a responsible caretaker of this crucial piece of Virgin Islands history. “We see the cultural significance, we honor that significance and want to enhance it by being able to sustain the property with commercial activity,” he said.