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Mistrust, Tax Burdens and Blatant Land Theft Accusations Made Against National Park Service During Heated St. John Town Hall

Community's outcry over disputed land ownership, rising taxes, and restricted access echoes in heated meeting

Community Center / **Published On December 22, 2023 06:12 AM /**

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Though a town hall meeting in St. John hosted by Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett intended to record the public's comments on a draft bill to prevent additional expansion of the National Parks, the conversation was instead dominated by discussions about a decades-long battle over land ownership and recognition.

According to Ms. Plaskett, who broached the discussion regarding HR 3025, since the establishment of the National Park there has been a "land creep which has brought the park to the

size that we believe to be untenable.” However, as per one long-time resident of St. John, the bill is “worthless” unless the powers that be officially designate the park’s boundaries. “First, we need to solve the problem of what the park actually owns,” said Pam Gaffin.

Ms. Gaffin, who has lived on St. John for the past 30 years, questioned how the bill would work, when “you are proposing a law that says it can’t be any more than a number that’s unknown.” Though achieving little in the way of appeasing Ms. Gaffin, Ms. Plaskett explained that if enacted, HR 3025 would ensure that if any new land were to be added to the National Park, an equivalent portion of land would need to be removed.

Boundaries only scratched the surface of the complaints many St. Johnians have expressed regarding the parks. Congresswoman Plaskett listened to accounts from several residents, including Lorelei Monsanto, who insinuated that the National Park Service has wrongfully claimed land belonging to their families. “They still owe us 300 acres of land,” stated Ms. Monsanto, who explained that her mother had successfully sued the NPS to recover some of the family’s property. “The park has stolen and still needs to give us back the land they stole.”

Raymond Roberts, who said that his family on St. John could be traced back five generations, revealed that his family is currently in court with the National Park Service over land that had been in his family for centuries. “How could they own all property that four generations before me have been living on?” Mr. Roberts asked. According to him, upon the death of his grandmother in 2004, the matter was thought to have been settled, but as another resident revealed, the NPS requested that the case be reopened, and “insists on fighting them for their property.”

Abigail Hendricks, the resident in question, also raised concerns over increasing property taxes on “landlocked” land within the National Park’s boundaries. “So then all of a sudden, now my land tax has gone way up because I’m a part of the National Park,” she complained. She detailed land access issues, saying that several roads to access owned properties within the park have been blocked off. “How do you block me from getting to my property, but the government expects us to still pay for it?” asked Ms. Hendricks. That question was met with rousing applause.

Ms. Hendricks told Congresswoman Plaskett that the park creates an “invasive feeling.” She admitted that “my bandwidth for the park is getting smaller and smaller and smaller,” displeased that the NPS continues to “disregard what was rightfully ours.”

While another resident, Kurt Marsh, expressed a desire to take on a more solutions-oriented approach, he too expressed qualms with the National Park Service. “What kind of life are we living in this place if that’s the fight we have to have all the time?” asked Mr. Marsh. He told Ms. Plaskett that families will soon no longer be able to afford to initiate legal proceedings against the NPS. “It would be nice to see the government of the Virgin Islands as well as our delegate establish a task force with the Office of the Attorney General to help these families do this work.”

Several St. Johnian families have maps and deeds that establish their ownership of land on the island, explained Mr. Marsh. “We don’t need to prove to anyone outside of that very official set of documentation what we own, and where and how. Anybody else should prove that to us,” he argued. “We have deeds, so they should use them too,” referring to the National Park Service

Mr. Marsh also lamented the hefty taxes associated with the land, explaining that his family pays \$25,000 in annual taxes for 130 acres of property in Coral Bay, while the National Park is only assessed \$35,000 a year for 75,000 acres of land. “Where is the equity there? That’s insane,” he told Ms. Plaskett.

Throughout the two-hour-long meeting, residents shared a host of concerns, criticisms and fears, including the possibility that the current battle on St. John could spread to St. Thomas and St. Croix as well. The overall tone was that of distrust from indigenous residents who believe that the National Park Service has treated them unfairly for the past six decades. Mr. Roberts, who said that his family on St. John could be traced back five generations, went as far as suggesting that there is “some kind of cahoots going on with either the National Parks or Friends of the National Parks that is trying to take what the locals have.”

There is not yet a clear indication whether HR 3502 will successfully make it through all the legislative steps to be enacted into law.

Since the USVI does not have any representation in the Senate, Ms. Plaskett will have to rely on friendly counterparts to move the bill forward. “I feel you, your passion and your pain,” she told the town hall’s attendees, promising that, “I am working to try and get things done. I’m not there for myself.”