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Bryan Justifies Land Swap for First PreK-12 School: Largest Public Sector Investment in St. John's History

State of the Territory: St. John's development and land swap take center stage

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Render of proposed Sprauve Pre K-12 school on St. John. By. GVI

During Monday's State of the Territory address, while Governor Albert Bryan Jr. gave passing mention of plans to rehabilitate roads and damaged government facilities on St. John, his main focus with respect to the island during his speech was on concerns over the National Park Service and plans to construct a government-run school that can accommodate high school students.

In late December, [residents of St. John complained](#) to Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett over decades-long battles with the National Parks Service over land ownership and the appropriate

recognition. Several complainants were in opposition to any new land being subsumed within National Park boundaries.

“I acknowledge the frustration and concerns of those St. Johnians that believe that the National Park Service has not been a good neighbor and has perhaps intruded on the quality of life of the native residents,” the governor said during his address, his sixth as governor. “But I also listened very intently to the concerns of students and former students talking about their experiences and the hardships of attending high school as a resident of St. John.”

The governor was referencing the recent exchange of Whistling Cay for 11 acres of land in Estate Catherineberg for the development of a K-12 school on the island. “The construction of the school has long been viewed as a more than reasonable justification for the land swap. Having to travel to the other islands for a high school education is “unfair and puts them at a disadvantage,” asserted Governor Bryan.

Issues of alleged “unfair treatment” by the NPS has been discussed directly with both present and former park superintendents, as well as Secretaries of the Interior,” Mr. Byran noted. However, the contentious land swap agreement is something to celebrate, he said.

“We have written a momentous chapter in Virgin Islands history by reclaiming a critical piece of property from the National Park Service for the use and benefit of Virgin Islanders,” said the governor, his tone upbeat throughout the address. “This marks the largest public sector investment ever made on the island of St. John, a noteworthy accomplishment achieved together.”

Legislative amendments to the Whistling Cay exchange agreement were fodder for [heated discussions](#) during the last two regular sessions of the 35th Legislature, when Senators Novelle Francis and Angel Bolques, who assisted the governor in championing the move, butted heads with Senators Alma Francis-Heyliger and Kenneth Gittens. The two lawmakers were opposed to what they considered to be a lopsided deal.

The amendments eventually passed, paving the way for the land swap to move forward.

The governor’s summation of the matter in Monday’s State of the Territory address characterized the outcome as a positive one. “As controversial as it may have been in 2023, history will view this as a pivotal moment in the development of improved quality of life for the people of St. John,” he said.