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Controversial Gifft Hill Container Apartment Complex Receives Support After Developers Announce Revised Plans

Lawmakers weigh potential benefits against public outcry and aesthetic concerns in rezoning hearing

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Former Senator Roosevelt David represented Gifft Hill Land LLC during Thursday's Wednesday's hearing. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers on Wednesday considered three rezoning requests for infrastructural developments in the St. Thomas-St. John district.

First was Bill 35-0137, a request for a use variance to allow Ari Goldschneider's company, Gifft Hill Land LLC, to lease individual bedrooms under the "lodging/rooming house" category on a plot of land across from the Gifft Hill School in Cruz Bay, St. John. Goldschneider had originally requested that the Department of Planning and Natural grant him a rezoning from R-2, Residential Low Density to R-4, Residential Medium Density.

That rezoning would have permitted him to construct 6 residential buildings with 74 ensuite bedrooms and communal living spaces in each building. Goldschneider's original intention was to offer affordable, long-term housing by leasing individual rooms at a monthly rate of \$1,500, exclusive of utilities. However, his plan was met with much resistance from residents in the area. According to Territorial Planner Leia LaPlace-Matthew, over 75 community members "expressed opposition and concerns."

Among the plethora of concerns aired during a public meeting was the opinion that the Gifft Hill location was "not the solution to the present housing situation." Residents also expressed a fear of "overcrowding the neighborhood" and worried about the development's impact on the neighboring school. Members of the community also objected to the fact that Mr. Goldschneider intended to use shipping containers, albeit new and unused, to construct the dwellings, saying that they would "detract from the natural beauty" and "become part of the debris blown around in [a] strong storm." In total, Ms. LaPlace-Matthew listed 47 individual complaints made against the proposal.

However, the request before the Committee of the Whole on April 17 was not for a permanent rezoning, but instead for a lease variance to the property's current R-2 classification, something that evidently was not communicated to the public, or those who had previously opposed it. According to Roosevelt David, who represented Mr. Goldschneider, the reconsideration was made "in the spirit of compromise and cooperation." Mr. David, who argued that the same group of people continue to oppose new housing developments on St. John merely for the sake of it, said that the variance would allow Mr. Goldschneider to construct two container buildings with 24 ensuite units and give him the leeway to rent individual rooms rather than the master-lease requirement under the current R-2 category. If construction proceeds, lessees will share a kitchen, living room, and laundry spaces.

According to Ms. LaPlace-Matthew, who highlighted the territory's current housing crisis, "zoning reform is being encouraged at the national level to address the housing shortfall." Several lawmakers agreed that new and affordable housing options are necessary in both districts, but disagreed that the \$1,500 rental fee qualified as economical. Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger was the first to share that she "can't really put this under affordable housing." She instead described it as a "high-priced boarding house."

Nevertheless, Ms. Francis Heyliger and several of her colleagues agreed that the project could assist in providing housing issues for at least one cross-section of USVI residents. Mr. Goldschneider anticipates that the housing development will attract "adult working professionals including first responders, nurses, teachers, service industry workers and marine industry workers." For Senator Samuel Carrion, who referenced the desire to construct the building from shipping containers, the time was ideal to explore various housing options. The Gifft Hill Land LLC team assured legislators that the building would be constructed with a solid concrete foundation to withstand hurricane-force winds.

Noting the robust public opposition, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory commented that "we can't just oppose projects to oppose them." She, however, expressed concern that insufficient consideration

was being given to constructing homes catering to families on St. John, where a “housing stock” issue currently exists. Meanwhile, Senator Angel Bolques wondered whether they would be able to maintain the \$1,500 rental fee while encouraging the developers to carry the project to fruition. Mr. Bolques warned that he would become their “worst enemy” if they failed to do so, referencing its importance to people who needed housing.

Others, including Senators Francis Heyliger, Marvin Blyden, and Novelle Francis, encouraged Giff Hill LLC to consider aesthetic improvements, suggesting cladding on the exterior to make the container buildings more attractive. Mr. Francis suggested that some of the opposition that was generated may stem from others wanting to construct similar projects.

Meanwhile, Senator Franklin Johnson said that he needed to review the architectural plans before lending support to the development.

If the variance is not granted, Mr. Goldschneider told committee members that the company could enter a master lease with one of the entities, such as Pafford, that have already expressed interest in renting the communal buildings to serve as staff accommodations.

Meanwhile, two other variance and rezoning requests were responded to favorably by lawmakers. Through Bill 35-0241, Dionne Carty Jackson and her family are requesting a use variance for their residential property in Kings Quarter, St. Thomas to allow for a restaurant and a fruit bar. Situated across from the Charlotte Amalie High School, the takeout restaurant will not serve any alcohol. Ms. Jackson told Frett-Gregory that there are also plans to return the second floor of the currently unoccupied building to a family residence. Once all permits are granted, Ms. Jackson anticipates a 6-month construction period for her project.

Senators also expressed support for Bill 35-0256, which would rezone a parcel of land in Cruz Bay from R-2, Residential Low Density to P, Public. This would allow the Department of Public Works to construct a new maintenance building on the site, complete with parking and other improvements. Funding is currently available, and a bidding process will follow once permitting is completed.

All three bills are expected to be voted on during the next legislative session.