The Virgin Islands Consortium

No Regulation Over Interior Design, Lack of Enforcement and Need For Employees: St. Croix HPC Calls For Help

The HPC calls for closer cooperation with lawmakers to extend their jurisdiction inside historic buildings, aiming to preserve critical heritage

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Last week's meeting of the St. Croix Historic Preservation Committee highlighted the pressing need for a collaborative effort to strengthen the entity as well as update legislation surrounding how historic districts are administered.

During a lengthy debate about signage requirements for businesses and the plethora of signage and other violations dotting the historic towns of the Virgin Islands, territorial Historic Preservation Commission Chair Kurt Marsh emphasized how impossible the task of enforcement was with that responsibility delegated to a board composed of volunteers with only one paid employee.

Mr. Marsh reminded that the HPC's responsibilities extended not just to the historic districts, but to all National Register sites. "So the ruins across each of the islands, the mills, Buck Island – we have much more that we are responsible for than just the historic district," he said. "But because of capacity, most of the activity has been held to the districts for at least the past 20 years or so."

He surmised that if more enforcement officers could be recruited by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, then some could be assigned to the historic districts for enforcement purposes.

"You guys got my full support," said St. Croix Administrator Sammuel Sanes, expressing appreciation for the work of the HPC. He noted that "at the end of the day, basically what we want to do is just preserve our history and tradition." He added, "St. Croix is such a beautiful place with so much history that needs to be shared."

Shawna Richards, who represented Senate President Novelle Francis at the meeting, promised that the Legislature itself was amenable to considering amendments to legislation that would assist the HPC in carrying out its mandate. "If there are any specific areas that you think need a closer look…the Office of the Senate President would certainly be happy to take a closer look and see if there are any areas that we can bring forward," she said, noting that "many sections of the Virgin Islands Code have not been amended in a very long time."

She encouraged the HPC, through the DPNR, to "really make a strong case" for budget to hire additional staff for enforcement purposes.

Meanwhile, the HPC is committing to more public engagement over the course of the next year, to foster greater understanding of the responsibilities – and concerns – of those who live and do business in areas designated as historic districts, as well as of the powers and limitations of the HPC.

Some of that work to educate people about the remit of the HPC must be done amongst legislators themselves, Mr. Marsh noted. He pointed to a recent bill from Senator Kenneth Gittens as an example. "He's talking about things that HPC in some ways has no business dealing with. His bill talks about people being able to do what they want with their interior. We have no jurisdiction on the interior of structures," Mr. Marsh noted. "So drafting a bill that takes a power away from HPC that we don't have, is kind of a waste of time and resources."

Mr. March urged the Legislature to be "a little bit more intentional" when crafting draft legislation to govern the operations of various entities and agencies. "It's kind of wild that a piece of legislation was drafted without consulting the Commission and the Committees," Mr. Marsh opined, calling for greater collaboration between Legislature and regulator in the future.

Mr. Sanes voiced concern that interior walls were outside the jurisdiction of the HPC. “I do know that we have some buildings here in which there are some walls inside with some historic significance,” he said, pointing out a building near Government House that used to house stables. Upon receiving confirmation that a property owner could destroy historical aspects of a building once they are on the interior, Mr. Sanes expressed his discomfort with that status quo. “We might have to address that somehow, somewhere because it’s just part of our history.”

While Mr. Marsh agreed, his response grappled with the current reality. “We could sit here and turn blue in the face and talk about why we should preserve those interior parts of structures,” the architect said, “But a developer just wants to build what they want to build, and just wants to make the money they want to make.” Until the government at large committed itself in a real way to supporting the mission of the HPC, “we won’t ever see much change,” Mr. Marsh lamented.

Mr. Sanes vowed to talk to a legal representative to see whether current rules can be amended to give HPC jurisdiction over building interiors, but Phil Condrington interjected to return the conversation to the question of enforcement. As the sole staffer on the commission, he eloquently described the almost impossible task he faces on a daily basis, dealing with recalcitrant business owners and fielding requests and calls from the public.

Both Mr. Codrington and St. Croix HPC Chair Collette Burgess reiterated that the HPC’s intent was not to hinder or stymie the aspirations of business owners, with Ms. Burgess pointing out that at the Committee’s recent annual meeting, it was noted that 99 of the 99 submitted applications had been approved over the last fiscal year, albeit with a little tweaking on some of them. “We are not turning people away because we want to – we’re just trying to bring people into compliance,” she declared.

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