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## Legislators Approve Zoning for 88-Unit Housing Development in St. John

Senators approve the development of 88 affordable housing units in Cruz Bay, St. John, featuring modern amenities such as walking trails, a community center, and a swimming pool, in response to the island's housing crisis

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Conceptual sketch of a living room interior, not the actual design for the planned St. John development. By. GETTY IMAGES

The prospect of a new affordable housing development in Cruz Bay, St. John, prompted lawmakers to throw their support behind Bill 35-0281, a rezoning request for the property in question.?

The request was made by Gershwin Sprauve before the Committee of the Whole on Monday. Mr. Sprauve asserted that “high housing costs and limited availability have led to overcrowding, homelessness and economic strain on local families.” He told lawmakers that the housing crisis is creating a demand for “decent, sanitary, safe and affordable housing types in St. John.” His land in Estate Adrian is “suitable for additional affordable housing.” Mr. Sprauve foresees the development will be attractive to middle-income earners who have “no alternative but to seek housing on the island of St. Thomas.”?

He intends to construct 22 three-story buildings with 88 dwelling units for long-term, family-friendly housing. The complex will comprise units of various sizes, from studio to one, two and three bedroom apartments. According to Keshoi Samuel, a planning technician within the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the buildings will “be designed to resemble a villa-style residence.” Proposed amenities include walking trails, a community center playground, and or swimming pool. It is anticipated that the project will occur in phases over 5 years.?

Mr. Sprauve anticipates that “the challenges with sourcing building materials, labor, and the coordination of organizing all the necessary resources” will contribute to the lengthy timeline. Plans for the affordable housing development include hurricane-hardened construction, modern amenities and “energy efficient features to promote sustainability.”

He was, however, unable to provide a specific cost estimate for the project, which he told Senator Ray Fonseca could range from \$40-\$100 million. Currently, construction on St. John costs approximately \$1,000 per square foot, Mr. Sprauve testified, describing the figure as “unconscionable.” The high cost of construction concerned Senator Marise James, who worried that it “translates into a higher rental cost.”?

Meanwhile, Senator Novelle Francis urged Mr. Sprauve to construct as quickly as possible. “It seems like this trajectory is on its way up without any decline in the near future...In two [or] three years out, the cost is gonna increase more.”

Though much grander in scale, this development is not Mr. Sprauve’s first. He told Sen. Francis that he intends to use “best practices” from the first project. “I got a 6000 square foot building done in 18 months,” he informed lawmakers.

Mr. Sprauve’s large development proposal will inevitably require governmental support, he said. “I’m exploring all opportunities, not just the local government,” he told Senator Franklin Johnson. The developer testified that he has made inroads within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. “I’ve gone to the Housing Finance Authority, and Housing Authority just to inquire [about] what programs they’re looking to bring online,” he told Senator Dwayne DeGraff, who was also curious. Senator Marvin Blyden, chair of the Senate Committee on Housing, Transportation and Telecommunications, suggested that Mr. Sprauve explore a public-private partnership. “I think there are funds out there right now that can assist you in this space.”

Meanwhile, Senator Angel Bolques wondered about access to utilities and sewer lines on the currently undeveloped property. “I’ve got to bring whatever I need to the site,” stated Mr. Sprauve, aware that there is no potable water on the property either. “There is a natural ghut that flows through the property that tends to be quite plentiful at times. I think that there are some drilling opportunities for a well.”?

Despite some queries, lawmakers were thrilled by the prospect of such a large development on St. John. Senator Alma Francis Heyliger commented that the dearth of affordable housing was spurred by “an influx of Airbnb that greatly reduced our inventory.” For Senator Milton Potter, the

plans are “music to my ears....That category of housing is virtually non-existent in the Virgin Islands right now.”

Though the original request was for a rezoning from R1 Residential to B3 Business Scattered,, DPNR suggested that the R4 Residential zone is sufficient to undertake the proposed construction.

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