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Health Department's Plan to Rebuild Morris De Castro Clinic Gets Key Approval

While the plan receives praise for its design, concerns remain about the clinic's location amid broader development plans for Cruz Bay

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Design concept for the Morris de Castro Clinic in St. John, USVI. By. V.I. DEPT. OF HEALTH

The V.I. Department of Health has secured a key approval from the Historic Preservation Committee which will advance efforts to replace the Morris de Castro Clinic in Cruz Bay, St. John.?

“The Morris De Castro clinic has been a vital part of our department's mission, serving as a crucial resource for the community in both public health and emergency response capabilities or

capacities,” said Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion, during Tuesday’s meeting. “Maintaining the clinic's presence in its current location is crucial to ensuring that the people of Virgin Islands have access to their care as they need, especially during times of crisis.”

Ms. Encarnacion vowed that the reconstruction project would proceed in a manner that “reflects and preserves the clinic's cultural heritage while modernizing its facilities to better serve our community,” a sentiment echoed by project architects.

Gilbert Laban and Jerry Traino, who presented on behalf of Springline Architects, walked the committee through what the project would entail. The rebuilt clinic would be a three-story structure, with 14 parking spaces instead of the current five. The clinic’s primary entrance would be along Henry Samuel Street, Mr. Laban said, with additional pedestrian access from other points.

“We actually poured our heart into this,” said Ms. Encarnacion, speaking of the intricate architectural design. “It’s something that we’re not just talking [about] but we believe that St. John actually deserves.”

St. Thomas-St. John HPC chair Akil Petersen was appreciative of the distinctive design. “This is really, really impressive and beautiful,” he remarked. Sean Krigger, director of the State Historical Preservation Office, agreed. “I think they did a tremendous job of meeting the needs of the department,” he said, praising the efforts of the architects. Nonetheless, he expressed his opinion that the clinic should be located elsewhere, “but that’s neither here nor there.” The proposal from the Department of Health has “met the objectives of the historic district,” he declared.

Mr. Kurt Marsh, the only member of the HPC who resides on St. John, pointed out that Henry Samuel was a one-way street, and made some suggestions for adjusting the flow of traffic into the clinic based on how the roads in the area were laid out. While he also complemented the design, he, like Mr. Krigger, opined that the clinic should be relocated “two blocks away, to the Julius Sprauve School facility, which is to be [demolished] for its reconstruction.”

Mr. Marsh fretted about the lack of congruency between these plans and larger, longer-term ideas about what the development of Cruz Bay will look like. “The issue that I have with this problem and several others in this town and other towns,” he said, is that they “don't take into consideration that there is a long term comprehensive land and water use plan being strategized.” Mr. Marsh bemoaned that lack of inter-agency communication, which leads to “a lot of disconnect between what’s happening, especially with these large projects.”

Acknowledging that the rebuilt facility is “very necessary” for the community, Mr. Marsh nevertheless lamented that “it’s kind of like we chasing our tail” due to the lack of coherence between high-level development plans and “projects that otherwise should be reconsidered and redeveloped per that plan.”

Mr. Marsh ultimately abstained from the vote on approving the proposed project. HPC Member Enrique Rodriguez also abstained initially, but switched his vote to yes. This gave the motion the three affirmative votes needed to pass.