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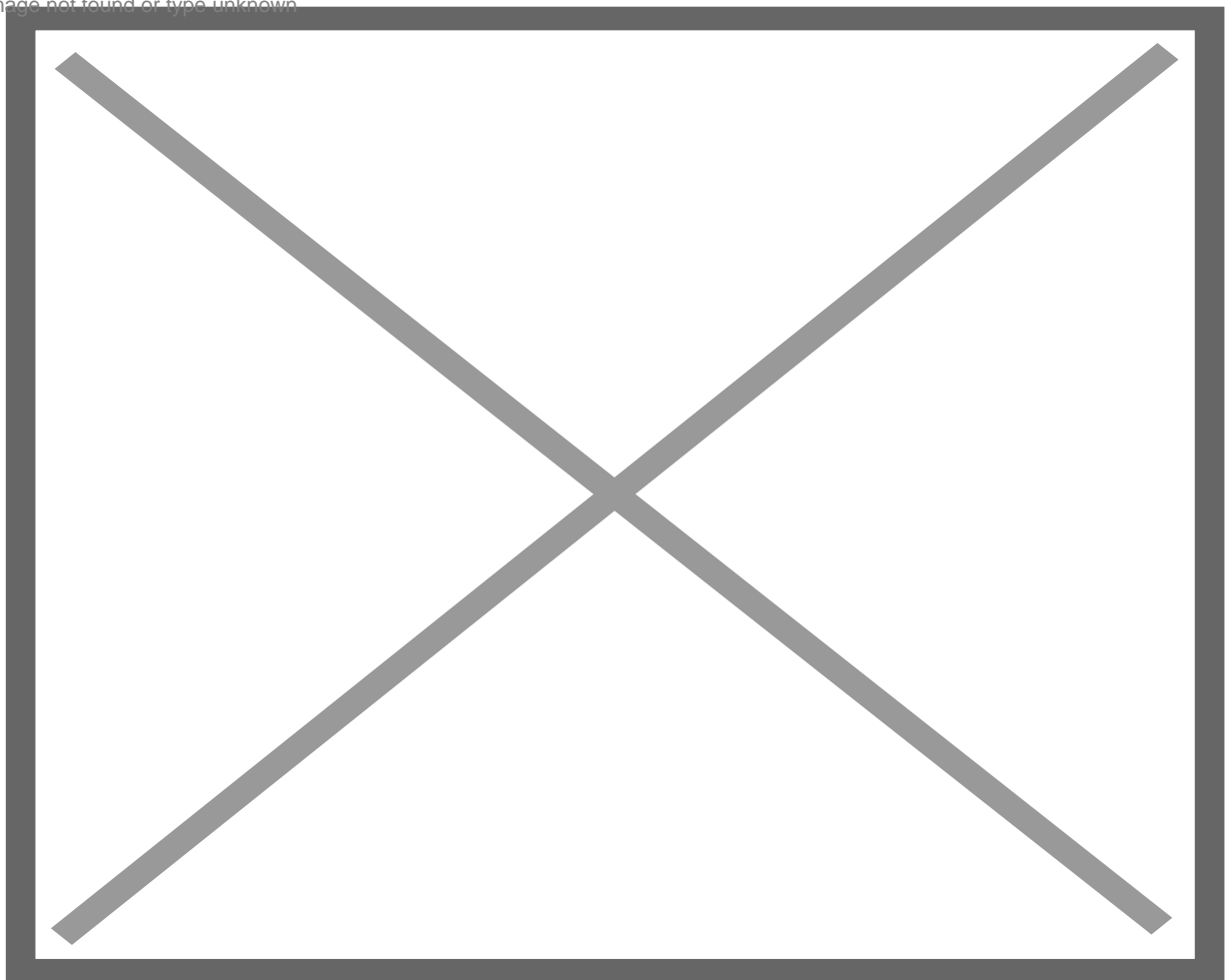
Smith Bay Rezoning Request for Residential and Commercial Development Gains Favorable Response from Senators

Lawmakers show support for the project despite concerns from some neighbors about increased traffic and the loss of agricultural land

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Nelcia Charlemagne **September 20, 2024**

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Photos of site layout and its current condition for development. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

A request to rezone Parcel 19-1-2-8 Estate Smith Bay, Nos. 1, 2, and 3 East End Quarter, St. Thomas from A-2 (Agriculture) to B-3 (Business-Scattered) has raised the ire of neighboring property owners.?

James Jones, who owns the land in question, wants to construct four three-story residential buildings and commercial spaces on the property. Among the commercial uses, Mr. Jones intends to develop a convenience store, laundromat and management leasing office to serve the residential blocks, as well as a car rental service garage, a water delivery service, an equipment rental and leasing component with storage space, and a farming supply store.

But for two nearby property owners, this is too much change with too many possible consequences for the wider community. Leia LaPlace-Matthew, the territorial planner in the Department of Planning and Natural Resources listed the formal complaints before the Committee of the Whole on Thursday.?

One complainant contended that since the land was previously used as a farm and grazing area for livestock, the soil is “rich, deep and potent,” insinuating that it should continue to be reserved for purely agricultural use. Another complaint suggested that the proposed rezoning “seeks to retool one of the few areas on the east end where food can be grown.” Others were concerned about increased traffic in the area if the development were to proceed.?

“The road leading to the subject property passes 11 lots occupied by the elderly, small children, pets and large grazing animals,” one complaint read. There were concerns over their ability to “sleep peacefully at night.” Additionally, neighbors worried about heavy machinery associated with the proposed business ventures moving along their road at unsociable hours.

Whereas the developer is interested in offering affordable housing options by constructing new blocks, complainants suggested that the housing crisis is “recognized as far as pricing” and not for a shortage of housing stock. They wondered if “sacrificing one of few areas in the country that is still unspoiled is the solution.” The proposal “greatly impacts the way of life for surrounding residents,” claimed one complaint.

Mr. Jones, along with his attorney Jennifer Jones, disagreed with the aggrieved. Attorney Jones explained in her testimony that the applicant “aims to continue the property's historical use for light organic farming and retail sales of agriculture products.” In fact, she said, Mr. James is “supporting local agriculture and contributing to food security and sustainability within our community.” She did away with claims that the project would increase sedimentation in nearby guts and Lindquist Beach. “The access road to the property will be well maintained and the commercial activities will be limited in time and scope to minimize any impact on current residents,” she promised.?

The applicant believes the project is “a vital step forward for both economic and community development of St. Thomas.” Whereas some neighbors voiced reservations, another – Najackie Boyd – testified that he is in “full support” of Mr. Jones “trying to develop a residential housing community.” The applicants cast doubt on the sincerity of their detractors, arguing that one of the complainants “does not own property in the area, nor does she reside in the area,” but instead “helps to operate a horse riding facility in a nearby plot.” “The horses used to graze on our property,” clarified Mr. Jones to a curious Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger. He testified that though a notice to cease grazing was posted, “it was torn up the day thereafter.”

Despite the reservations from neighbors, lawmakers generally supported the request. Nonetheless, Sen. Javan James suggested “finding a middle ground” between the developer and neighbors. The applicant contends that the middle ground has already been identified, with plans to use the flattest portions of the land to plant crops. “We started to plant crops of different sorts, from banana, plantain, peppers, cucumber, watermelons,” noted Mr. James.?

Lawmakers are expected to vote on Bill 35-0325 in an upcoming legislative session.

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