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Legislators Support Rezoning Efforts to Address Housing and Business Expansion

Affordable housing in St. John and multi-use commercial spaces in St. Thomas lead the charge for economic and community growth in the territory

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Legislators have fully supported several rezoning requests in the St. Thomas/St. John district intended to spur economic development, and in one instance, correct a zoning oversight.

On Thursday, the Committee of the Whole listened to testimony from the Department of Planning and Natural Resources on the requests in question.?

The first, Bill 35-0309 seeks to rezone parcels 25 and 25B in Estate Susannaberg, No. 17A Cruz Bay Quarter, St. John from from R-1 (Residential-Low Density) to R-3 (Residential-Medium

Density). The new designation will allow Shemura Nicholson and her family to construct moderate to middle-income multi-family dwellings on their property, as a response to what the family calls the “pressing need for affordable housing” in their community. The planned development includes three buildings on each parcel and is expected to be completed in phases. While a formal plan has not yet been prepared, the project is expected to take between three to five years to complete. The final proposal is expected to include short-term housing options as well.

Several senators were concerned about the availability of financing for such a large-scale project, but they were assured that access to funding is available.

Senator Samuel Carrion took some exception to the family’s plan to divvy up half of the property for short-term rentals. “Short-term rentals are taking up our housing stock and making it difficult for residents to be able to find housing that is at moderate income,” he bemoaned. Nonetheless, he joined his colleagues in celebrating Ms. Nicholson’s entrepreneurial spirit.

Legislators were also supportive of Bill 35-0327, which would rezone parcel 61-3 Estate Thomas, 6A New Quarter, St. Thomas from R-5 (Residential-High Density) to B-2 (Business-Secondary/Neighborhood). The measure would allow Able Investments LLC to develop a multi-use office/commercial space on the property, which territorial planner Leia LaPlace-Matthew described as “two three-story buildings available for office, retail, restaurant and classroom use.” The development is expected to happen in two phases and may take up to four years to be completed.

Errol Baker, the applicant, told the Committee that the development will house his business office while offering rental space for other commercial outfits. “It could be almost anything,” he explained. “It’s segmented in bays [so] that it could be a restaurant, it could be a doctor’s office, an attorney; just anyone that’s interested in having space.” One of the buildings will also feature spaces for learning, Mr. Baker told lawmakers. “We’re planning to implement STEM programs for kids...The intent is to create opportunities for students to explore things like artificial intelligence [and] cyber security.”?

The third request was the simplest of the day. Raphael Bostic, who owns the property Plot 4 Estate Charlotte Amalie, New Quarter, St. Thomas, sought legislative approval to rezone the parcel to bring it into conformity. Bill 35-0324 rezones the property from R-2 (Residential-Low Density-One and Two Family) to B-3 (Business-Scattered). Though originally constructed as a family home in the 1950s, the property has been used commercially for over thirty years. No additional development is planned at this time.?

Though no votes are taken in the Committee of the Whole, lawmakers pledged to support all three bills at the appropriate time.