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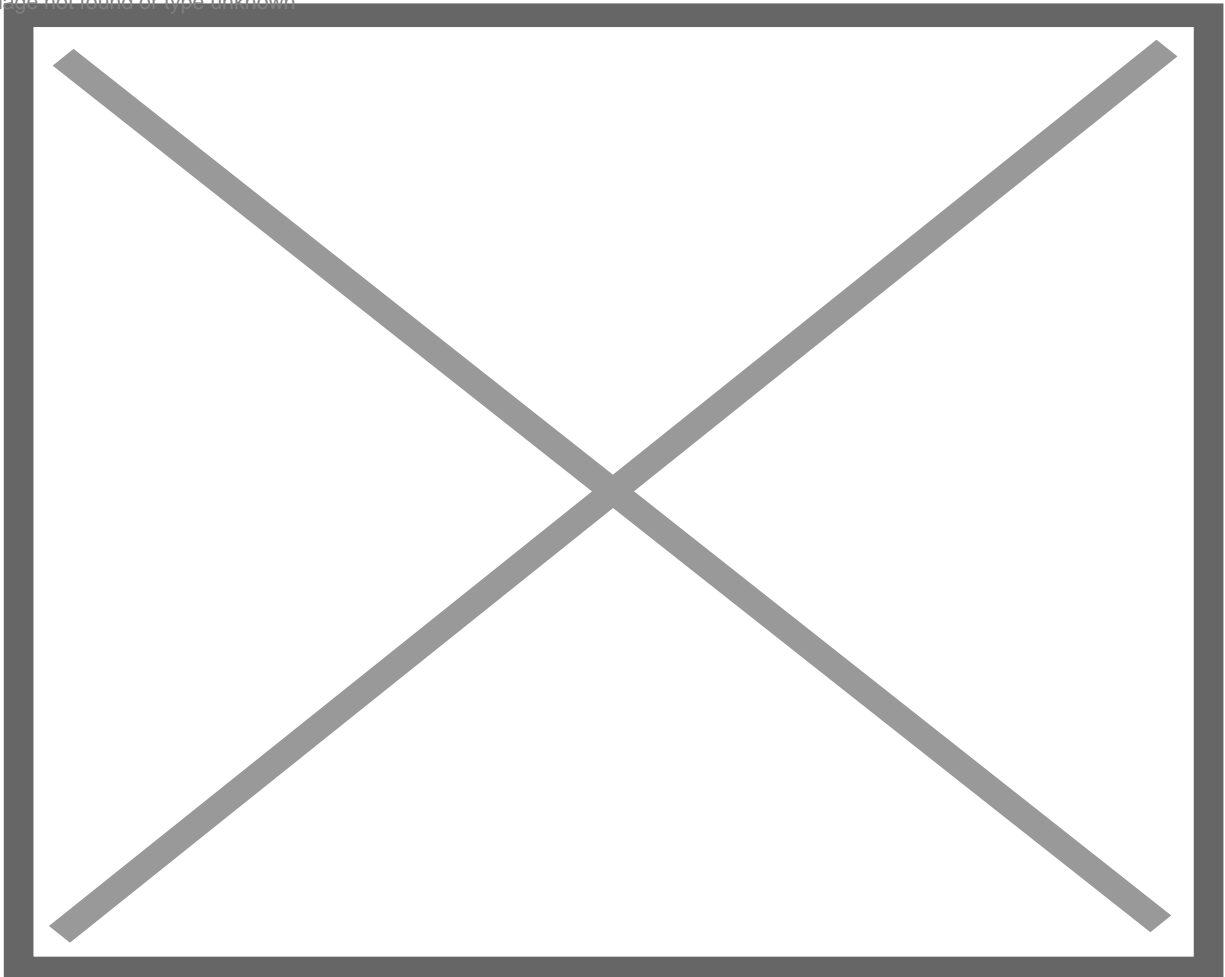
Fred Hotel Expansion Gains Lawmakers' Backing Amid Local Concerns About Overcrowding and Property Values

With senators' support for plans to add 34 additional rooms, neighbors worry about increased traffic and changes to the character of the area, while developers emphasize job creation and revitalization

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The Fred Hotel in Frederiksted, St. Croix

Some residents in the vicinity of the Fred Hotel in Frederiksted, St. Croix are nervous about plans to expand its footprint, which would add another thirty-four guest rooms to the beachfront property.?

On Monday, representatives for USVI LLC and Next to the Fred LLC appeared before the Committee of the Whole to request the rezoning of their existing Strand Street property to accommodate the expansion. Bill No. 35-0322 seeks to rezone Plots 36, 37, 38, and 42 Strand Street from W-1 (Waterfront-Pleasure) to B-1 (Business-Central Business District).?

Currently, there are twenty guest rooms available at the adults-only hotel. Leia LaPlace Matthew, territorial planner in the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, told lawmakers that the developer's plans include maintaining the existing buildings on plots 36 to 38 and constructing two new buildings that would increase the room stock by twenty-four. On the remaining parcel - plot 42 - a new building with 10 guest rooms will be built. Developers will also create new parking spaces at a lot some 200 feet away from the current parking lot.

Construction is expected to last eighteen months, beginning in late 2024. The construction phase is expected to generate forty jobs, with twenty permanent positions available once the hotel expansion is complete. According to Kenneth Serrant, project manager at Design District Architects who is currently overseeing the project, the applicants are simply "seeking additional flexibility to achieve their business objectives."

However, at least three owners of adjacent properties have shared reservations with DPNR.

At least one neighbor was concerned about "security for the proposed parking lot that would be over 200 feet away," while another was worried about possible changes to beach access. The property managers have assured that beach access will in no way be affected.

?Multiple complaints were based on a fear that rezoning the property could result in "diminished property values," while others were anxious about "visual impact from tall buildings blocking water views or unsightly structures, possibly diminishing the appeal of the area and decreasing property values." Ms. LaPlace Matthew quickly explained that the proposed buildings are intended to be a two-story expansion and will not obstruct any sea views. The Fred Hotel is located in the historical district where structures can be up to three stories high.?

Another qualm was that the expansion of The Fred Hotel "could lead to overcrowding, loss of green space, or increased crime rates," and the opinion that it would "lower the residents' quality of life." Others were fearful of "traffic noise or change in [the] neighborhood's character" and overall environmental impact. Public comments also suggested that the expansion could "strain existing infrastructure like roads and utilities beyond capacity." In turn, Ms. LaPlace-Matthew reminded the public that the hotel once sat on an "underutilized site and could provide the encouragement needed for others to revitalize surrounding properties."

Both the project managers and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources disagree that the expansion will affect property values. "There will be no negative impacts to the property values in the area," said Clarence Brown of Design District Architects. "Property values would actually go up because it will improve the area," stated Ms. LaPlace-Matthew.?

Nonetheless, the property developers will be subject to "additional permitting oversight [which] will be required due to the property's location within the historic district and the coastal zone." Particular attention must be given to the possible impact of storm surges on the waterfront property. "The architect just has to design it properly," said Ms. LaPlace Matthew. The hotel's owners will be required to design a stormwater pollution prevention plan as well.

Several lawmakers emphasized the need to minimize damage to the nearby coast, however they were generally supportive of the request. "Anything that could assist our sister island of St. Croix

with economic development... is definitely a plus," said Senator Alma Francis Heyliger. Senators are expected to vote on Bill 35-0322 at an upcoming legislative session.

With the project expected to receive necessary approvals and proceed, Ms. LaPlace-Matthew contended that, "I think the greatest concern was just change, and not everyone is comfortable with change."

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