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Lawmakers Back \$29 Million Marina Project in Red Hook to Revitalize Eyesore and Drive Economic Growth

Legislators praised the project's potential to generate \$7.85 million annually and create 235 jobs, dismissing concerns from a resident's letter about restricted access to Vessup Beach — claims that developers have firmly denied

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Proposed Latitude 18 Building in Red Hook. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Perspectives on a planned redevelopment of the Latitude 18 Marina in Red Hook vary widely during a Tuesday Committee of the Whole, with lawmakers and developers touting its economic generation potential, while neighboring residents fear the restriction of public access to Vessup

Beach.

During the hearing, testimony was provided on Bill 35-0424, which would permit Jack Rock B-A C, LLC to undertake development of the marina that was obliterated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. Work on the project will necessitate the dredging of 7,200 yards of material, and the use and occupancy of 45.83 acres of submerged land.

Once redeveloped, the Red Hook Bay property would feature a 10,000-square-foot restaurant, retail and marina services building, a 10,000-square-foot warehouse building, and a boat dry storage and services yard area. The dock, revised after several public hearings, is expected to measure 23,119 square feet consisting of 4 fixed piers and a bulkhead forming 17 permanent slips. A wave attenuator measuring 380 square feet is also expected to be constructed, as will a mooring field with solid waste disposal.

According to representatives of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the developer will be expected to pay an initial \$7,200 reclamation fee to the Government of the Virgin Islands before the commencement of dredging activities, followed by an annual rental fee of \$150,000 paid in advance.



The current site of the Latitude 18 development has been described as a "blight."

George Dudley, Jack Rock's legal counsel, informed lawmakers that two public hearings have been held to discuss the project, with revisions made based on public comment. The developers have also met with the V.I. Port Authority which manages the nearby ferry terminal, to clarify that the development will not interfere with VIPA's operations. The road leading to the property will be maintained and eventually resurfaced by the developers, Mr. Dudley noted.

The reconstruction "would have a beneficial impact on the territory's economy of almost \$29 million during construction," Mr. Dudley told lawmakers. Once operational, the marina and mooring field is expected to have a positive economic impact of \$7.85 million annually. Mr. Dudley assured that "particular attention was paid to environmentally sensitive areas...noise abatement for our operations, and to ensure public access to the adjacent shoreline" – Vessup Beach.

Public reaction to the planned Latitude 18 marina development has been less than positive. In a letter sent to lawmakers and the local press, nearby condominium owner Timothy Moos wrote at length about his reservations. "This Latitude 18 Marina project is the gateway for this non-USVI person(s) to control ALL access to one of the last St. Thomas beaches easily accessible by large public crowds and unencumbered by hotel restrictions or government fees," he said. Mr. Moos described the project as "unconscionable" and "a slap in the face of every Virgin Islander." He argued that approving the permit would "show that our government is more concerned about money than the people."



The site has also been described as dangerous.

Mr. Moos is adamant that “at best, this project minimally increases the recreational needs of the people by allowing more boats to anchor.” The redevelopment “significantly decreases the public’s access to Vessup Beach,” said Mr. Moos, and “eliminates a huge parking area directly adjacent to Vessup Beach and now offers only a few spaces for beach visitors much farther away.”

On the YouTube livestream of Tuesday’s Senate hearing, Barbara Adams wondered whether neighboring residents have truly been considered. “What about our concerns? We vote and live here,” she wrote in the comments under the feed. Ms. Adams was skeptical that local Virgin Islanders would continue to be “welcomed to hang out on the beach listening to our music and enjoy the beach.”

Senator Novelle Francis placed on the record that he received Mr. Moos’s letter and had read local articles on the subject, and was therefore aware of the public sentiment. He subsequently requested a response from Mr. Dudley, who hit back at Moos’s claims. “I don’t think whoever wrote that thing actually read the terms of the permit,” Jack Rock’s attorney said. “As I’ve said here now on the record a couple of times, there is no intention to block any public access to this facility...There is no impediment to using the beach. I don’t know how else I can say it more plainly.”

Lawmakers largely sided with the developers on the issue, praising the project’s job creation opportunities. Mr. Dudley anticipates 235 jobs during construction, and almost 100 permanent jobs once complete.

“I think that needs to be very clear that this project is not a new project,” said Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, a direct contradiction to what Mr. Moos believes. “When we have businesses that show an interest in our communities and our economic development, we should not push back on them,” the St. Thomas senator chided. Senator Dwayne DeGraff, who also represents St. Thomas, agreed that the current site is an “eyesore” in need of rehabilitation. “This investment, to me, is a great investment to make,” he argued.

Responses to questions on adequate parking, traffic management, the positioning of underground fuel storage tanks, and public access all satisfied lawmakers. They learned that the property will comprise 84 parking spots and that the fuel tanks to service the marina will be buried approximately 900 feet from Vessup Beach.

Mr. Moos, however, was not comforted by this information. He shared a second missive on Tuesday night. He again wrote about beach access, the project size, the access road, and the movement of the road closer to property lines. “I ask that you vote against this project only until

the above details can be addressed properly,” Mr. Moos pleaded with lawmakers in his second letter.

While this seems unlikely given the enthusiasm expressed by legislators, Senator Novelle Francis said that with the project anticipated to take up to five years to complete, he is hopeful for an avenue for concerns to be vetted and addressed. “The minute that you talk about developing and starting to improve those things, then individuals come out of the woodwork and we just don't want to discount that,” he said.

With the bill going before the full body on Wednesday, there will likely be no more opportunities for public comment on the proposed project.

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