

New Julius E. Sprauve School Project Enters CZM Permitting Stage, With Focus on History and Sustainability

CZM officials reviewed plans for a multi-building campus on St. John. The design honors historic burial grounds, includes rainwater harvesting, and aims for solar self-sufficiency, but lacks space for traditional sports fields.

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Janeke Simon **April 16, 2025**

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Render of proposed Sprauve Pre K-12 school on St. John. By. GVI

The project to replace the Julius E. Sprauve School on St. John has now reached permitting stage, as it was presented for a public hearing of the Coastal Zone Management Commission in the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

Tuesday's CZM meeting was the first stage in the application for federal consistency determination for the project. Senior Principal of Education in the DLR Group Pam Loeffelman walked those present at the online meeting through the new proposed design.

"There are basically six buildings that sit on the site," Ms. Loeffelman said, explaining that the steep nature of the land, plus the almost 3 acres of the plot which fall into the historic no-build zone, meant that design options were somewhat limited. "It has been really put on the western side there the access to public amenities for meeting and gathering," she noted.

Department of Education architect Chaneel Callwood noted that what appeared to be a ceremonial burial space had been discovered on the grounds, with ancient graves surrounding a large tree. "There's nothing like it around. It looks to be hundreds of years old...so this is something that we want to preserve...we want to be able to share this with our students in a way that doesn't damage the environment," she said.

Altogether, said Ms. Loeffelman, the goal of the project — as with all the new school projects in the territory — is to focus on the development of the whole child and facilitate inquiry-based learning. "Certainly USVI history, archaeology and conservation is an important component of this site," she said, noting its connection to the remainder of the Catherineberg estate. "I could imagine that there is a pathway that young students fall in love with the parks and really want to pursue that as a pathway anywhere from a park ranger to an archeologist to a historian," said Ms. Loeffelman, implying that the very design of the school itself could lend itself to creating a connection between its students and the history and culture of their ancestors on St. John.

After listening to an overview of the layout of the school buildings, officials and the listening public had several questions.

Attendees learned that there were plans for rainwater capture. Runoff from the roof would be harvested and stored in a series of cisterns, to be treated and used in normal school operations. Any overflows would be safely funneled downstream, through a feature designed to capture excess sediment, project officials said.

The lack of outdoor fields for baseball, soccer or football was also highlighted as an issue, although Ms. Loeffelman pointed out that half-court basketball and pickleball would be accommodated in the proposed layout. "I think we need to have a conversation about some funds to be left to find a field in another location, not too far away," countered CZM St. John chair Andrew Penn. "We can't just eliminate it," he argued, noting that "baseball, soccer, those are sports that we grew up with here in the Virgin Islands." Several members of the public reiterated their concern about the lack of adequate outdoor recreational space, a sentiment that Ms. Callwood duly acknowledged and pledged to address.

Otherwise, officials were pleased to learn that the school is being designed to be fully self-sufficient when it comes to electricity, despite being connected to the municipal grid. The goal is to ultimately be able to feed power back into the grid, especially during weekends and summertime when the school's power needs are low.

Overall, Tuesday's presentation was well received, with one member of the public calling it "reassuring." Despite lingering questions about managing traffic in the small space and the pressing need to identify a suitable off-site location to accommodate outdoor physical recreation for students, CZM officials and St. John residents alike expressed enthusiasm for the project, which officials have estimated will be completed in the next three to five years.

