

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill To Turn Catherineberg Into Museum Held In Committee For Now

VIC News / **Published On April 07, 2017 11:04 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **April 07, 2017**



ST. THOMAS -- A bill sponsored by Senator Janette Millin Young aimed at turning the Catherineberg residence into a museum has been held in committee so amendments could be added to the measure.

The historic mansion—commonly known as the Governor’s Mansion—is currently used as the official residence of the governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands; however, it has gone unoccupied for some time due to concerns of mold and other health-related issues. As a result, the use of alternative residences in lieu of the Governor’s Mansion, has been a cause of discord among Virgin Islanders, since it comes at a high cost to taxpayers.

According to Mrs. Millin Young, "Bill No. 32-002 intends to offset a small portions of the monies owed to our government by the West Indian Company Limited (WICO), which owns the property, by having them fund the conversion of the estate into a museum." Mrs. Millin Young believes that Catherineberg may create a new revenue stream for the territory as a museum, because it may potentially attract tourists to learn more about the Virgin Islands.

During her opening remarks at Thursday's hearing, Mrs. Millin Young said, "We will make Catherineberg a museum that shows the great things we have done, despite the horrors of the past."

As it currently stands, the bill has no provision that designates Catherineberg as a museum, but such language is among the amendments expected to be made. In a release issued late Thursday, Mrs. Millin Young said she was pleased with the discussions during the hearing -- in the Committee on Finance -- even though the bill was ultimately held.

"While Bill No. 30-0002 was held in committee, I see this as a positive step," Mrs. Millin Young said. "I am pleased that colleagues from both sides of the aisle agreed with the bill's intent, along with all the written testimony." She said that the intent of her bill is pure and simple, "to turn Estate Catherineberg into a museum and put it to use while generating desperately-needed revenues for the territory."

No one from the West Indian Company (WICO), current owner of Catherineberg, was present for testimony, although the semiautonomous entity sent written testimony from President Joseph Boschulte, stating WICO's support for the current measure.

"WICO supports this bill," reads the written testimony. It went on to detail WICO's Catherineberg expenses -- including \$4 million between 2001-2016. WICO then combined its expenditures between the aforementioned years and added what it says is the property's current book value of \$3.2 million, for a total of \$7.3 million -- which WICO says would be in lieu of its current balance to the government of \$6.65 million.

The bill, seen below, would require that the Government of the Virgin Islands purchase the property and use the funds WICO owes the government as an offset; and reduce the annual amount of \$700,000 that WICO is to contribute to the government annually to \$250,000. The funds would go to the Department of Public Works for maintenance of the property.

There was also written testimony from the Department of Planning and Natural Resources in support of the measure, adding that the museum should be in the care of D.P.N.R.

Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty -- also through written testimony -- supported the measure as well, mentioning D.O.T.'s experience in museum experiences. "The Department of Tourism partnered with the St. Croix Landmark Society to implement the "Living Museum" in 2014, providing travelers with a first-hand experience of the historical and cultural elements of this historic landmark. We certainly envision that a similar experience can be integrated at Estate Catherineberg," wrote Mrs. Nicholson-Doty.

The USVI's Hotel and Tourism Association, although mentioning the need for new attractions to the territory, did not express support for the bill, stating the need for added information. "Catherineberg could be a unique historical and cultural addition to our tourism product, but any assessment of its value in that regard requires a solid business plan that considers the undoubtedly substantial cost of renovations and operations and rests on well-founded revenue projections," wrote association chairman Scott Derrickson.

Voting to hold the bill in committee were senators Neville James, Brian Smith, Marvin Blyden, Tregenza Roach, Dwayne DeGraff and committee chairman Kurt Vialet. Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly was absent.

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