

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill To Turn WICO-Owned Catherineberg Into Museum Moves To Full Body

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ST. THOMAS -- A measure to turn Estate Catherineberg into a museum, sponsored by Senator Janette Millin Young, was forwarded to the full Senate after senators who make up the Committee on Rules and Judiciary voted in favor of the bill during a hearing on Monday at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall.

The bill allows the West Indian Company, which owns Catherineberg, to sell the mansion to the Government of the Virgin Islands using taxes that WICO owes to the government as an offset. According to WICO's new CEO, Clifford Graham -- who testified at the hearing in favor of the sale -- the company owes the government \$6.65 million in taxes.

"If Bill No. 32-0002 (seen below) is approved, going forward the government would receive a PILOT [payment in lieu of taxes] of \$250,000 per year, which WICO's budget can accommodate," Mr. Graham said (he later clarified that while \$250 payment would still be difficult to meet, it was much more attainable than the current \$700,000, which WICO has been unable to pay for years).

During his testimony, Mr. Graham pointed to multiple reasons for the noncompliance, including the opening of the Crown Bay port in 2006, payroll for its 70 employees, costs relative to the upgrades of the facility, for which WICO recently floated a bond of over \$11 million, as well as the cost to maintain the facility, with Mr. Graham estimating annual costs anywhere from \$220,000 to \$60,000.

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, although the official residence of the governor remains Government House, St. Thomas. 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.

When the bill was first heard, [it was held in committee](#), although senators agreed with its intent. "While Bill No. 30-0002 was held in committee, I see this as a positive step," Mrs. Millin Young said last month. "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."

At Monday's hearing, lawmakers generally agreed with the measure.

"I like the idea of museums; I worked for cultural resources in North Carolina and I know their value and the revenue generator it can [be]," Senator Positive Nelson said. He said his issue with the measure was simply timing, as the Government of the Virgin Islands continues to struggle with liquidity. "Right now we, just as WICO is trying to relieve itself from a liability, the government is trying to acquire one, and the idea is who's going to pay for what," he said.

Mrs. Millin Young, as she's done in the past, spoke of the measure as not only an attempt to preserve history, but also as a means through which the government can generate funds.

"As the primary sponsor of this legislation, I want to not only preserve history, but also generate revenue," Mrs. Millin Young said. She said the reason WICO has been unable to make money from Catherineberg, is because WICO only maintains the facility. If the facility were to be transferred to the government, and the government installs all the necessary components boasted by successful museums, then funds would be generated, Mrs. Millin Young opined.

Senate President Myron Jackson, who supports the measure, said he would like to see amendments that would place the the commissioner of Public Works on a Catherineberg task force, as well as a historian, because of the history associated with the mansion.

All senators who make up the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, their names seen [here](#), voted in favor of the measure.

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