

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Says His Recent Meetings In D.C. Were 'Highly Productive'

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ST. THOMAS -- U.S. Interior Department officials say they will support the territory's efforts to establish a 'day visa' program, expand parking in Christiansted, resolve longstanding issues within the National Park on St. John and back a permanent increase in the amount of federal rum excise taxes returned to the local treasury, according to a Government House release issued today.

Governor Kenneth Mapp described his meeting this week with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke in Washington D.C. as highly productive. The Department of Interior's Office of Insular Affairs oversees the outlying United States territories including American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

“The Interior Department has committed to working with us on several key matters,” Mr. Mapp said. “We also spoke at length about how our hospitals are being underfunded as a result of outdated CMS fee schedules.”

CMS, or the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, is a federal agency within the United States Department of Health and Human Services that administers the Medicare program and works in partnership with state and territorial governments to administer Medicaid. Mr. Mapp said that the Schneider Hospital is being reimbursed at 1983 levels and Juan F. Luis at 1996.

Interior will support the Virgin Islands’ efforts to establish a ‘day visa’ program whereby individuals from neighboring islands could easily receive clearance for one-day excursions to the territory in order to shop or see a medical specialist, the governor said. Such a program will likely provide a boost to the local economy.

During the meeting, Mr. Zinke reiterated his pledge to allow the National Park’s parking lot in Christiansted to soon remain open during evening hours.

“The lack of parking in Christiansted is becoming more acute as the economy improves and people are patronizing our restaurants and other businesses – more parking will allow for more growth,” said the territory’s leader.

St. Johnians will be relieved to learn that Mr. Zinke has agreed to review reopening access roads to private properties “landlocked” within the National Park on that island. Mr. Mapp said that while he deeply appreciates the sanctity and beauty of the Park, it was unconscionable to continue to deny access to those with legitimate rights to utilize their land.

“I truly hope we will be able to resolve this matter once and for all,” he said.

Mr. Zinke has pledged to support the territory’s effort to lobby Congress to permanently increase the federal rum excise taxes returned to the U.S. Virgin Islands. Although the current enacted rate is \$10.50 per proof gallon, Mr. Mapp has said that Congress has “regularly and seamlessly” approved a \$13.25 price per gallon cover-over rate since 1999. Unfortunately, the increase has to be reapproved each year creating a climate of needless uncertainty.

“Making this increase permanent is a small matter for Congress, but makes a significant difference in our ability to budget,” the governor said. “I truly thank Secretary Zinke for his commitment in this regard.”

The governor, Education Commissioner Sharon McCollum and Office of Management & Budget Director Nellon Bowry met with U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos on Tuesday to discuss a strategy for the exit of the third party fiduciary appointed to oversee the expenditure of federal grants. Improved management of funds at the V.I. Department of Education has rendered the additional oversight unnecessary, according to the governor.

The governor is also slated to attend the National Governors Association’s Summer Meeting in Providence, Rhode Island, before returning to the territory on Monday.

