

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed | Losing Caneel Bay Would Not Be Good For The Vulnerable Virgin Islands Economy

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Virgin Islanders are keenly aware of the continued tension between our community and the National Park Service.

The NPS is an entity which should support the preservation of one of our most important resources: our God-blessed beautiful land. Yet, the NPS often neglects to work with and support the greatest resource: we, the people of the Virgin Islands.

Since being elected, I have worked tirelessly to improve relations with the Park service and we, the local residents, with much of that effort focused on St. John. I stand by my record for holding NPS and others accountable and ensuring their respective leadership

is responsive to the concerns of local residents.

When I learned a former Virgin Islands National Park Superintendent decided to stop the Summer Youth Program and instead utilized the funding for unrelated park operations, my office intervened, because the Summer Youth Program benefits our youth and serves as a critical means of community outreach and local engagement with the park.

It was the tireless efforts of my staff and me that ensured restoration of the program and the departure of a Superintendent whose lack of interest in this program, to me, demonstrated a lack of his regard for the people of the island he served.

My office is now actively engaged in helping with the search of a Virgin Islander-- in keeping with the original mandate of the Virgin Islands National Park-- to lead on St John.

When residents of both St. Croix and St. John and some park employees shared their concerns with local park leadership and issues of accountability, my staff and I urged the regional administration to focus oversight resources closer to the ground. They did.

Now, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico are no longer among the hundreds of parks in the southern region but instead fall directly under the auspices of the newly-created Caribbean Parks Superintendent.

The impact of this change was demonstrated after the hurricanes when NPS Caribbean region had boots on the ground in St. John long before any other federal agency.

My office has also held numerous town halls with Park Service officials and residents in St. John and St. Croix, including one last June in which I invited NPS Regional Director Stan Austin, newly-appointed Caribbean Parks Superintendent Randy Lavasseur and the Park superintendents on both St. John and St. Croix respectively.

Those town halls allowed residents to speak directly to NPS leadership and were in large part to address concerns raised by residents about the concessions and bidding process, along with the need for local input with the Park Service.

So, to say that I am somehow beholden to interests other than those of the people of the Virgin Islands and to the interests of facilitating an environment conducive to capital investment and economic growth in our community is patently untrue.

The facts are important and so is context. The Caneel Bay issue is no different.

After agreeing with the ownership of Caneel Bay to an extension of the use of the Park, and commencement of the lease agreement process, NPS headquarters has, with no explanation, dragged its feet for over five years to negotiate terms and complete various assessments so the resort can continue operations.

Congress allowed NPS to determine whether it was better to transition the operation to a concessions arrangement rather than a retained use estate agreement (RUE) in 2010.

In 2013 NPS issued a draft environmental assessment calling for such a transition. However, eight years later, that environmental assessment by NPS is still not final.

Now we – the residents of this territory and the hundreds of employees of Caneel Bay Resort – are faced with the reality of losing a significant part of our hotel and tourism product or, best case, losing that crucial economic benefit for a prolonged period.

Caneel Bay Resort is the largest private employer on St. John, with more than 400 employees. It attracts more than 15,000 guests-- who must also travel through St. Thomas-- and generates more than \$65 million in annual spending to St. John. It also represents 7 percent of total employment in the territory's hotel and restaurant sector.

The legislation which I introduced recognizes that truth and is intended to do what is right for the hundreds of employees now out of work by allowing NPS the ability to negotiate use of the land and mandating they move the process along. In fact this would not be the only active RUE in the Park system.

Allowing the National Park Service to put the property out to bid, as some would suggest-- many of whom would rather not have any resort or activity at the Park in St. John-- would based on NPS' track record begin another years-long process, before construction on a new resort would begin. A process which at the end only allows the federal government to negotiate terms related to payment to the federal government and management by the resort owner. Provisions related to jobs, community engagement and other local interest must be part of the local government's tax incentive contract.

The 400-plus employees of the resort do not have that time. Their families do not have that time. Our Territory's hotel and restaurant industry does not have that time neither does our economy.

My conversation with our local government, the hotel association, and employees of the Park drove the introduction of the legislation. That my legislation to extend the existing RUE is intended to favor an interest other than that of my constituents who are out of work, and the broader economic recovery of St. John and the territory after Hurricanes Irma and Maria are not only false, it is offensive.

Submitted on Thursday by: Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett.