

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Trump Administration Signs Agreement With USVI to Pursue Land Exchange for New School on St. John

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Gov. Bryan, with local officials, joins D.O.I. Asst. Sec. for Fish & Wildlife and Parks Rob Wallace and Asst. Sec. for Insular and Intl. Affairs Douglas W. Domenech virtually to sign a preliminary agreement for a land swap in St. John. By. GOVERNMENT HOUSE USVI

The Trump administration on Thursday signed a preliminary agreement to pursue a land swap between the National Park Service and the U.S. Virgin Islands, according to the U.S. Dept. of Interior (D.O.I.). The agreement opens the door for local officials to finally achieve their long-standing effort to construct the first K-12 public school on St. John, D.O.I. said. Public education on St. John is currently only available through the eighth

grade. In order to complete a high school education, students must commute by boat to St. Thomas each day during the school year.

"Today's historic progress is long overdue," said Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Rob Wallace. "It marks the first time the two governments have made a commitment to initiate the official process towards a final agreement. The Trump Administration and the U.S. Department of the Interior are determined to get this done for the people of St. John."

"This preliminary agreement is a promissory note to the students of St. John," said Governor Albert Bryan. "We need this land exchange to finally guarantee an excellent, safe education for all USVI students."

"The Office of Insular Affairs team has worked hard to help facilitate the exchange of lands between the National Park Service and the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and we are pleased to provide the necessary funding support and to help ensure successful next steps," said Douglas W. Domenech, Assistant Secretary, Insular and International Affairs. "We congratulate all parties for bringing this preliminary agreement to fruition to help benefit the students and families of St. John."

According to the release, in September the D.O.I.'s Office of Insular Affairs provided \$300,000 to the NPS to help fund the pre-requisite environmental compliance process to assess the impacts from actions associated with the exchange of lands on both people and resources. The environmental compliance process will evaluate the impacts of the intended use on cultural and natural resources as well as give the public ample opportunities to make their voice heard.

"We have waited a long time to get to this point, but there is more work to be done," said Margaret Everson, counselor to the secretary, exercising the delegated authority of the National Park Service director. "The National Park Service under the Trump Administration is glad to move efforts forward toward a commonsense solution that will help St. John families while continuing to honor our role as stewards of this special place entrusted to our care."

According to the release, under the non-binding preliminary agreement, the D.O.I. and government of the Virgin Islands will work together over the next 12 months to fully evaluate the opportunity for a land swap. The proposed exchange involves an 11-acre parcel within Virgin Islands National Park and an 18-acre island currently owned by the territorial government that is surrounded by NPS land and waters. There will be multiple opportunities for the public to participate in the process and share their thoughts while the NPS and GVI work together on appraisals for the two parcels and complete environmental and historic preservation compliance requirements. The NPS will keep the public updated about public comment opportunities through the park's website and social media.

For nearly three decades, the USVI and the U.S. government have discussed approaches to expanding education on St. John, D.O.I. said. Steps taken between 2012-2014 identified the 11-acre park parcel within the Catherineberg Estate as a possible location to support the island's education needs. In November 2019, Mr. Bryan offered the small island of Whistling Cay for consideration in an exchange, reenergizing

negotiations.

Virgin Islands National Park was established in 1956 and encompasses about 60 percent of the island of St. John. Land for the park was gifted to the Federal government by Laurence S. Rockefeller for the purpose of establishing a national park.

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