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DPNR to Place Buoys in Round Bay Waters Following Call For Beach to Be Declared Protected Area

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View of Round Bay on the east end of St. John By. GETTY IMAGES

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Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol on Thursday said that currently boaters and other users of Round Bay in St. John can anchor or use the bay without restriction, but the plan is to place buoys in the water to act as a visible anchoring guide.

“We have worked this out to be able to account for the multiple uses of Round Bay...Megayachts will have to be further out because it will have to be based on water depth,” Mr. Oriol said while explaining that following an analysis by divers attached to D.P.N.R., the conclusion is for buoys to be placed 350 feet from the shoreline.

When the buoys are placed in the demarcated marine space, any captain who ventures beyond will be ticketed because it will be an offense to go inside a swim buoy line, Mr. Oriol further explained.

The commissioner was responding to a plea from Kathleen Vargo, a St. John resident who has been advocating for Round Bay to be declared a protected area. In her testimony to the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection during a Thursday hearing, Ms. Vargo said that by proclaiming Round Bay a protected area, it would improve the bay's natural, ecological or cultural values.

"This will give Round Bay a fighting chance to recover its wildlife, coral reefs, and water quality before it is too late, while also providing a safer environment for boaters, swimmers, snorkelers, kayakers, and undersea life," she told the committee.

"Simply adding swim buoys and/or moorings will only serve to attract more traffic, hastening the destruction of the bay," said Ms. Vargo as she called on D.P.N.R. "to protect and preserve our precious public resources for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations."

Ms. Vargo stated emphatically that people should be able to enjoy the beach, "no question about that at all, we just don't want people anchoring within 500 feet of the shore or on the seagrass which they do all the time," she said.

"The big overall problem I want people to understand is that people come to Round Bay because it's beautiful, they come to Round Bay because we still do have good corals, we still have good snorkeling, we still have beautiful, beautiful ecosystems that are healthy and they are being challenged right now," she added.

Mr. Oriol informed the committee that 46 percent of St. John's waters are already protected and during a meeting with the Bryan administration, it was told to participants that declaring Round Bay a marine protected area would not be one of the goals of the administration. He further told senators that protecting this specific bay can result in other citizens demanding that other bays become protected.

The committee received testimony on D.P.N.R.'s operations to include but not limited to enabling law and jurisdiction, current agency challenges, and plan of action to resolve issues.

Mr. Oriol told the committee, which is chaired by Senator Carla Joseph, that consistent across the entire VI Government, the largest challenge for his department is staffing. "We simply do not have enough personnel for all of the work that needs to be undertaken," he informed lawmakers. "Particularly for the technical inspection positions, we are not seeing enough applicants to our vacancies."

"We have had some success in hiring UVI students for our biological science-based positions, and we are hoping to see an expansion to our non-biological programs. For example, doing internships with students to assist with IT needs. We have taken advantage of inter-personnel agreements with our federal grantor agencies and continue to employ fellows and contractor positions," he told the committee while explaining initiatives that have been undertaken to fill positions.

The commissioner further explained that D.P.N.R. is also engaged in direct recruitment and was not relying solely on job postings. "We've sent our legal counsel positions to career services centers at law schools such as Howard University School of Law, The University of Hawaii, and Roger Williams University. We are also looking into posting our positions with professional

organizations such as the International Erosion Control Association, and we are assessing our financial ability to contract staff augmentation,” he said.

In separate action during the hearing conducted at the Frits E. Lawaetz Conference Room on St. Croix, lawmakers approved two measures:

Bill No. [34-0148](#) - An Act honoring and commending LaVerne E. Ragster for her contributions and research efforts to the Virgin Islands, the University of the Virgin Islands and the children of the Virgin Islands and naming the University of the Virgin Islands Administration and Conference Center on St. Thomas in her honor.

Also approved was bill No. [34-0155](#) - An Act amending the Virgin Islands Code title 3, chapter 29, relating to notaries, notarial officers, and notarial acts by adding subchapter III enacting the “Virgin Islands Uniform Law on Notarial Acts (2021)”; and amending and repealing conflicting laws on notaries public.