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Draft Bill Clearing Path for Development of Historic Towns Meets Support, Opposition During Hearing

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Aerial shot of parts of downtown Christiansted

While there was significant support for a draft bill that seeks to limit the number of sites listed for historical preservation in the U.S. Virgin Islands by identifying specific locations in an effort to foster development, there were others who expressed concern about the effects the measure could have on some historic buildings.

The draft bill was introduced and issues raised during a town hall hearing Thursday, organized by the Senate Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture, led by Chairman Sen. Kenneth Gittens.

“The bill draft as presented raises numerous questions that if enacted as written could lead to the further destruction of the historic towns of Christiansted, Frederiksted, Charlotte Amalie, and Cruz Bay,” said Frandelle Gerard, executive director of Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, Inc.

She said that if the proposed measure is based on the premise that historic preservation is too costly and restrictive, it ignores the reality that historic preservation is about telling the history of a people through built heritage.

“In most jurisdictions, historic preservation is by and for the wealthy and grand structures. But here in the Virgin Islands we have the opportunity, and may I say the duty, to preserve the vernacular buildings of our towns and the historically Black neighborhoods in the historic districts,” said Ms. Gerard, who explained that the stories behind some of the buildings are linked directly to African ancestry.

“The historically black neighborhoods of the islands' towns and the areas called “Free Gut” on St. Croix, are arguably the oldest continuously occupied Free Black neighborhoods under the U.S. flag. Neighborhoods occupied by Free Blacks and their African-Caribbean descendants are passed down from generation to generation,” she said.

Ms. Gerard said historic preservation is about preserving the territory's culture and heritage. “The buildings hold the energy, display the craftsmanship and engineering of our African ancestors who toiled under unimaginable circumstances and left behind both grand and modest structures that speak to us, if we only listen,” she said.

Mr. Gittens at the beginning of the discussion showed several photos of the current dilapidated conditions of some buildings and said revitalization of the downtown areas is economic development, therefore the purpose of the bill is to identify specific buildings and locations as historical preservation sites to relieve the other properties in the downtown areas from restrictive historic preservation rules.

“This will also provide property owners with the ability to rebuild or renovate their property at a viable cost and allow for economic growth while creating jobs, increasing property value and attracting tourists,” he said.

Among those throwing support behind the draft bill was Ronald Russell, chairman of the Board of Trustees of Our Town Frederiksted, Inc. “Our Town Frederiksted supports any legislation that would encourage and support investment and economic development for the town,” he said. “Social programs that address the young people in our territory are absolutely necessary.”

Mr. Russell is of the opinion that activities in the town that could draw residents and visitors alike are essential. “As an organization, we understand the complex dynamic of retaining the historic presence and ambiance, but development is needed. With the new technology available, our future generations of Crucian and Virgin Islanders can come to appreciate Frederiksted as a destination for residents to congregate and enjoy and for visitors to experience the historic and cultural relevance of Frederiksted,” he said.

Also supporting the draft bill was Lisa Hamilton, president of the USVI Hotel and Tourism Association. “Our association is in full support of this proposed legislation. Historic tourism is a proven market. The downtown areas of Christiansted, Fredriksted and Charlotte Amalie are tremendous unrealized assets for historical tourism,” she said.

Elaborating further, she Ms. Hamilton stated, “Our Danish-West Indian history is of interest to the American and international tourists. If our once grand towns were renovated it would not only improve the marketability of our islands but also provide yet another reason to promote the territory. Tours providing information on the historic town buildings would be a source of employment for tour guides,” she said.

After listening to some of the pros and cons of implementing the draft measure, Senator Franklin Johnson said, “If we don’t come to some middle ground, we are going to leave the town worse than it is today,” while Senator Kurt Vialet stated, “We have to come up with a mechanism for restoration.”

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