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Plans Underway to Create USVI's First Territorial Park System

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The establishment and enforcement of a territorial park system could be the solution for disappearing green spaces in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and lawmakers are optimistic that fashioning a specific division to oversee its creation will enhance local and tourism opportunities for the territory.

Last week, senators forwarded Bill No. 34-0267 — sponsored by Senator Samuel Carrion — that will transfer authority from the Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation (DSPR) to a division within the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) to ensure the designation of various recreational spaces across the territory.

If the bill passes the full body of legislators, DPNR will be expected to establish a Division of Territorial Parks whose duty will include the conservation and protection of unique habitats and ecosystems, as well as the cultural and historical resources of the Virgin Islands.

The division will operate a territory-wide system of parks and recreation programs that will enhance outdoor recreational activities such as camping, picnicking, hiking, biking, horseback riding, environmental education, sightseeing, boating, fishing, swimming, and similar recreational activities.

According DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol, the department will be asked to formulate and put into execution a long-range, comprehensive conservation plan and program to acquire privately and publicly-owned properties that are suitable for development as parks or protected areas.

Vincent Richards, deputy commissioner of Dept. of Property and Procurement, said his team has already identified 43 government-owned properties which they believe can be developed for recreational use. They include 30 properties on St. Thomas, three on St. John and 10 on St. Croix.

Mr. Richards told lawmakers this is just a "starting list" as DPP plans to propose additional properties to place into the system for designation.

If the bill passes, DPNR will be responsible for Territorial Parks and Protected Areas whereas the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation will maintain responsibility for neighborhood parks and other areas for individual recreational use.

DSPR Commissioner Calvert White supported the bill, explaining that implementing this legislation would allow DSPR to focus primarily on its sporting and recreational facilities while still giving full support to DPNR.

A Territorial Parks System Revolving Fund and a Recreational Parks Revolving Fund will also be established to support the work of DPNR and DSPR.

"It is necessary. We don't want to become a concrete jungle," remarked Senator Novelle Francis Jr. He was supported by six other senators as well as non-committee member Senator Kurt Vialet.