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V.I. Government Puts Up \$250,000 For Revitalization of St. John Playground Set to Benefit Hundreds of Children

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The Cruz Bay Playground was damaged by Hurricane Irma in 2017. By. THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.

A bill that will improve the recreational park space in St. John has made it past the Committee on Finance and is headed to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further action.

More than 500 children on the island are expected to benefit from a \$250,000 grant from the V.I. government to the nonprofit group, Friends of Virgin Islands National Park.

The government's donation will help to complete renovations at the existing Cruz Bay playground.

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park Executive Director, Tonia Lovejoy, said both phases of the project amounted to \$800,000.

The first phase, she said, totaled just under \$500,000 which was paid through private donations. The remainder will be a mix of government funds and private donations.

Ms. Lovejoy expects that the revitalization work would be completed by the middle of January, 2023.

“Our vision is to create a fun and engaging playground surrounded with informational kiosks and shaded areas where children and their family will be able to find discovery, and joy, and learning in their VI National Park and in their community of Cruz Bay,” she said.

Dept. of Sports, Parks and Recreation Commissioner Calvert White said a Memorandum of Understanding to allow the Friend of the Virgin Islands National Park to continue leasing the land from the federal government will be executed once the funding is approved by the Legislature.

DSPR alongside the Dept. of Property and Procurement will execute the MOU so that construction can begin.

The park, which was damaged during the 2017 hurricane season is still the most heavily utilized recreational facility on St. John.

The land is owned by the National Parks Service and is managed by the Dept. of Sports, Park and Recreation under a special use permit which has been renewed each year for the past 51 years.

The five committee members in attendance on Friday voted in favor of the bill, noting the importance of recreational spaces for children.

The mover of the measure, Senator Angel Bolques is hoping that the enhancement of the park would reduce screen time for children and allow them to physically interact with their peers.

“The children of St. John do not have the vast open spaces of public property like the children on St. Croix and St. Thomas, and have not been able to see the major enhancements of youth activity or recreation due to the past hurricanes,” he said.

He added that he believes the park upgrades will give the youth a safe learning environment to develop physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills that will allow them to better communicate and build self-esteem.