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Lively Public Meeting Held with Plaskett, Bolques, and Federal Officials over STJ Land Swap Deal

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Whistling Cay, St. John. By. GETTY IMAGES

Just before the public comment window was supposed to close on the issue, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett and Senator-at-Large Angel Bolques Jr. convened an online community meeting to discuss the proposed land swap deal between the Government of the Virgin Islands and the National Parks Service that would facilitate the construction of an educational complex on the island of St. John.

A preliminary agreement to trade 11 acres of VI National Park land on St. John for the 18-acre Whistling Cay was signed by Trump administration officials in October 2020. In March 2022, what was supposed to have been a 30-day public comment period opened.

Almost a year later, Mr. Bolques said St. Johnians were still passionately engaged in the debate.

“We discussed the history from Point A to Point Z one would say, concerning how the whole dialogue or discussion came about surrounding the proposed construction of the school, straight up to where we are today”, he said.

The meeting generated vigorous discussion, Mr. Bolques said, expressing satisfaction with attendance and with the engagement from the community. He said that it was his responsibility to ensure that all voices in this discussion were heard.

One concern among many was whether executing the land swap would mean that the waters around Whistling Cay, long used for fishing, and part of the transit route between the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, would become off-limits for islanders. Mr. Bolques says the federal officials on Monday’s call made it very clear that this was not the case.

“They were able to let the general public know that the water rights were not included in this discussion, so fishermen would still be able to utilize those waters for fishing or even for traversing through Whistling Cay which is often considered a shortcut over to the BVI,” he said.

Another concern expressed at the meeting was over the idea that the government of the Virgin Islands would have to give or trade away property that it owned just to facilitate building a school on St. John.

Despite his appreciation for the diversity of viewpoints on the issue, Mr. Bolques made it clear that, as someone who grew up having to take the daily ferry ride to and from school, he thinks it is high time that necessity comes to an end for St. Johnian children. To complete a public high school education, students must commute by boat each day or relocate to St. Thomas during the school year.

“I don’t think in this day and age that our children need to continue with this kind of historical activity - moving over to St. Thomas, waking up [at] 5 in the morning to catch the 6 o’clock boat to get to school for 7:30, 8 o’clock. You know, it’s disenfranchising our young people. We finally have the opportunity to have the resources in place, meaning the land and the funding, in order to make this a reality. This 50-year-old discussion about a school on the island of St. John is now more ripe than ever, for us to be able to accomplish it. “

The senator noted that time was not unlimited when it came to the decision-making process. “We really have a very short window of opportunity when it comes to these federal dollars and when to use them...on time in order to reap the benefits from them...If we go ahead and sleep on it too long, the window is going to get smaller and smaller until it disappears.”

However, the Mr. Bolques noted that the meeting concluded with some asking for more time within which to submit their comments. He says Congresswoman Plaskett will be making inquiries on Tuesday as to whether this will be possible.

Between 2012-2014, the 11-acre park parcel within the Catherineberg Estate was identified as a possible location to support the island’s education needs.

In November 2019, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. offered the small island of Whistling Cay, which had historically been used for light manufacturing and fishing. This potential exchange provides the opportunity for local officials to finally achieve their long-standing effort to construct the first K-12 public school on the island of St. John.

