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Access to Whistling Cay Under NPS to Remain Unchanged Once Swap Takes Effect, Park Service Assures

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In response to concerns raised during a recent Senate hearing about a proposed land swap on St. John between the Government of the Virgin Islands and the National Park Service, NPS has provided detailed information about the exchange and addressed questions about public access, historical intent, and the ongoing process. The concerns were raised during the Senate's Committee of the Whole hearing on St. John.

According to the NPS, the Virgin Islands National Park (VINP) has 7,259 acres of terrestrial and shoreline habitat and an additional 5,650 acres of adjacent submerged lands, the latter added to the park in 1962 through Public Law 87-750. The park was established in 1956.

A significant point of discussion was the potential land swap involving the 17-acre uninhabited, undeveloped island of Whistling Cay and the Catherineberg parcel, currently under NPS jurisdiction. Governor Albert Bryan Jr. made the formal offer to the NPS in late 2019, with the Catherineberg parcel identified as the desired location for a new public school.

Concerning public access and use, the NPS assured that access to Whistling Cay and its surrounding waters would remain unchanged, as the island would still be considered public land under NPS management. Swimming, snorkeling, diving, and recreational fishing activities would continue as usual.

Answering another crucial question, the NPS clarified that the Catherineberg parcel, targeted in the land exchange, was not part of the original Jackson Hole Preserve donation, which led to the creation of the park. The NPS acquired the 55-acre plot from Ms. Ethel M. Bishop in 1968. Since her death in 2006, the deed was no longer encumbered, allowing for potential exchanges.

Furthermore, the NPS outlined their extensive civic engagement activities to ensure transparency and public involvement in the land swap process. Activities range from public comments, outreach events, radio appearances, and updates to various community groups and organizations. In addition, the GVI has also held several meetings, town halls, and open houses on the proposed land exchange and the envisioned future for a new school on St. John.

The NPS and GVI are aiming to jointly ensure a thorough and public-facing process as they work toward the goal of providing a new school for the community while preserving the natural and cultural integrity of the VINP, the NPS said.

The V.I. Legislature will meet in the Committee of the Whole on Thursday to vote on the deal.