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Locally Owned St. John Boutique Hotel Plan Gains Support as Lawmakers Weigh Rezoning for Susannaberg Property

Ronnie Jones seeks rezoning to develop a 48-room boutique hotel on family-owned land in Estate Susannaberg, with plans for a restaurant, event space, spa, gym, pool, ADA-accessible rooms and phased construction designed to limit site impact.

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Conceptual site plan for Parcel 15 Estate Susannaberg, showing the proposed layout for Ronnie Jones's locally owned St. John boutique hotel, including guest buildings, access roads and parking areas. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

A locally owned boutique hotel proposed for St. John drew strong support from lawmakers this week, as property owner Ronnie Jones presented plans to use family-owned land in Estate Susannaberg for a 48-room development intended to generate economic activity while maintaining sensitivity to the island's natural environment and residential character.

Mr. Jones, who was raised on St. John and returned to the Virgin Islands more than 20 years ago, told lawmakers he wants to create something tangible that will contribute financially to the territory and to his family.

Bill No. 36-0266 seeks to rezone Parcel 15 Estate Susannaberg from R-4, Residential-Medium Density, to R-3, Residential-Low Density. The change would allow Mr. Jones to develop a three-story, 48-room boutique hotel spread across six buildings.

The project is expected to be built in three phases. The first phase would include public spaces such as a restaurant, event space, spa, gym, pool, and 42 parking spaces. The second phase would include the first set of guest rooms, while the remaining rooms and landscaping would be completed in the final phase. Of the 48 rooms, 12 would be ADA-accessible.

Gail Pagan, a planning technician at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, explained that the R-3 zone "allows a broader range of uses, as of right, it imposes more restrictive development provisions." Because of the "sensitive" nature of the site, including its proximity to protected areas, DPNR found the stricter development guidelines within R-3 to be appropriate.

Mr. Jones accepted DPNR's position and said the project would provide public benefit.

"This proposal offers clear public benefit, including support for substantial tourism, creation of local employment opportunities, positive economic contributions, while preserving St. John's natural beauty and residential integrity," Mr. Jones testified.

Both Mr. Jones and his architect, Kurt Marsh, said the development is being designed to minimize impact.

"We are mindful of how we build, and we want it to be something that's not obstructive in any way, but definitely appreciated by all," Mr. Jones said.

Mr. Marsh explained that "the building is positioned where it's terracing the hillside, so that we minimize the amount of excavation that needs to happen." Landscaping, he said, is also expected to be designed to "capture a lot of the runoff and retain it on site for gray water treatment systems." Although the design is "contemporary," Mr. Marsh said it would include "more traditional elements."

Senator Milton Potter welcomed the concept but raised questions about traffic and the project's footprint.

"I love the idea of a locally owned, environmentally friendly boutique hotel on St. John," Mr. Potter said.

Mr. Marsh again emphasized that the project is intended to have limited impact, while focusing on the experience the site can offer.

"I think we want to think about quality, not quantity," he said. "If you see the grandeur of the view looking back at the keys all the way to St. Thomas in the distance, and on a clear day, you can see

Vieques, Culebra, Puerto Rico. There's value in that experience.”

Mr. Marsh said the team is “exploring concepts of different development types,” and that Mr. Jones is in “consultation with entities for financing.” Although no firm timeline was provided, Mr. Jones, who is 67, said he wants to deliver the property to his family by his 70th birthday.

“I think it's going to definitely generate some excitement,” Senator Hubert Frederick remarked.

Senator Novelle Francis encouraged Mr. Jones to make full use of government support that may help move the project forward.

“I hope you have more than one plan of financing to make sure that you could hit the road running so you're ready to conclude with your drawing once this is approved by us,” Senator Clifford Joseph advised.

Senator Avery Lewis urged Mr. Jones to be ambitious in pursuing opportunities tied to the project.

“I want you to get EDC benefits. I want you to hook up with reputable chains and so forth, so we could get the best bang for our buck out there in St. John,” he said.

With lawmakers responding favorably, Bill No. 36-0266 is expected to be successful.

Lawmakers also appeared inclined to support Bill No. 36-0268, which would grant a zoning use variance for Parcel No. 300-B Revised Cruz Bay Town, Cruz Bay Quarter, St. John. The property is government-owned and zoned P, or Public. The Department of Property and Procurement currently leases the adjacent property to Courtesy Car Wash LLC, where a car rental business operates.

The variance for Parcel 300-B would allow Courtesy Car Wash to operate a car wash capable of servicing three vehicles at one time. While lawmakers raised questions about water and detergent runoff, representatives from the business were not present at the meeting.

Vincent Richards, assistant commissioner at the Department of Property and Procurement, spoke on the developer’s behalf.

“They're an excellent tenant. They're excellent business people, local, excellent tenants,” Mr. Richards said.