

MANY VIRGIN ISLANDERS OUTRAGED OVER PLANS FOR RESORT AT A PRISTINE BEACH

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Three decades ago, a wealthy New York financier bestowed on the people of the Virgin Islands a precious gift. It was Magens Bay on the north coast of St. Thomas, considered one of the most beautiful and unspoiled beaches in the world.

Now, despite public outcry and the anger of environmentalists, the way has been opened to build a \$40 million resort on a portion of the beach held by heirs of the benefactor, Arthur Stiles Fairchild.

The lame-duck legislature decided this week to let stand its decision to rezone the 166-acre beachfront tract to permit commercial development. Hugo Dennis, president of the legislature, which is known as the Senate, said the senators who take office in January would be left to decide the fate of the one-mile strip of unbroken white sand and palm trees.

The horseshoe-shape bay of crystal-clear water has become the focus of a fight over the piecemeal manner of development in this territory of the United States that includes St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John. The dispute figured in a bitter election last month in which many of the senators who voted for it were defeated. 7 Incumbents Were Defeated

In October a bill rezoning the heirs' tract was attached to an omnibus bill that passed without debate on the day the Senate recessed for the election.

Environmentalists asserted that the Senate had allowed the largest pristine beach on St. Thomas to be opened to commercial exploitation without giving the public a chance to argue the merits.

In the election for all 15 Senate seats, seven incumbents were defeated. Three others had chosen to retire.

At hearings this week on the bill to reconsider the luxury resort, some of the defeated members said they continued to feel the plan was in the best interests of the Virgin Islands.

They were confronted by individuals and planners who said the election outcome should have given the Senate a message that the public wanted the developer to submit his plans to scrutiny through the normal zoning process. Dispute on Giver's Intent

"It is outrageous that Magens Bay, which is prized by the people, used by the people, given as a gift to the people, should be taken away in this manner," said Edith Bornn, a local lawyer who has helped lead the fight against commercial development of the bay.

"Not only was established law not followed on this rezoning matter, but it was surreptitiously meshed into a bill that was not even on the agenda," she said at a hearing this week.

James Armour, the developer who wants to build the resort, testified that Mr. Fairchild indicated before his death in 1951 that he approved of some resort development at

Magens Bay. Existing zoning permitted residential development that could harm the area more than the plan for a resort, he said.

Mr. Armour said he wanted to build resort units covering 50 acres at an unspecified distance from the beachfront. He said, however, that no marine improvements were contemplated and that no structures would be erected to block public access to the beach.

The project, he continued, will be environmentally sound and could provide up to 500 new jobs for St. Thomas. Another Project Is Assessed

Mr. Armour is the developer of Mahogany Run, a resort and golf course a little more than a mile east of Magens Bay. Mahogany Run has won praise for its design and attention to the environment.

Yet, to many it also represents the runaway growth of luxury resorts and housing that is blocking out the natural beauty of an island that spans only 32 square miles of mountainous land.

"The very basic challenge to these islands is government's lack of commitment to planning," Mrs. Bornn, an islander, said in an interview this week. "We do have a master plan, but it is ignored more than it is observed."

Magens Bay, on the north-central coast, is considered "the people's beach." It is a popular moor for yachts, and its proximity to the capital, Charlotte Amalie, a busy port on the south coast, has made it a popular bathing beach for those islanders without other access to the sea. The bay is 15 minutes by car from the capital on a road traversing the steep, narrow spine of mountains in the center of the island. Other Projects Planned

From the heights above the bay, Sir Francis Drake watched his fleet sail forth to battle the Spanish, and for tourists visiting St. Thomas, Drake's Seat is a memorable promontory that looks down on Magens Bay and a coastline to the east that is dramatic in its panoramic sweep.

Seven other luxury resort projects are now being studied on St. Thomas. The Virgin Grand Hotel on Smith Bay is expected to open next year with a basic room rate of \$195 a day. Owners of the Sapphire Beach resort on the island's east end are asking permission to add 385 new oceanfront rooms, raising criticism from the owners of nearby luxury condominiums who say their privacy would be intruded upon.

While many members of the incoming Senate may indirectly owe their election to the Magens Bay issue, few are committed to blocking the development.

It is not even assured, Mrs. Bornn commented, that the new members will rescind the

zoning change and order a review of the application.

"If we keep destroying the beauty of our islands and make them into concrete jungles," she said, "I'm afraid we will lose our tourist economy."

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