



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, HISTORIC
PRESERVATION, YOUTH AND RECREATION

FEBRUARY 5, 2016

TO:

The Honorable Myron D. Jackson, Chairman
Members of the Committee on Culture, Historic
Preservation, Youth & Recreation
Legislature of the U.S. Virgin Islands

RE: Status of Coki Point

Good day Senator Jackson and members of the Committee on Culture, Historic Preservation, Youth & Recreation. My name is Trudie Prior and I am General Manager and President of Coral World Ocean Park. With me today is Lee Kellar, General Curator of Coral World Ocean Park. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the situation at Coki Point. As you can imagine, given Coral World's location near the end of the point, conditions at the beach and on the road approaching Coral World are of critical importance to us.

It has been nearly 19 years since I became General Manager of Coral World. Early in my tenure, knowing some of the difficulties Coral World had faced under previous ownership, I made an effort to bring together stakeholders in government and the private sector to discuss traffic congestion, parking limitations, and crime among other issues. Although we had many meetings, nothing ever came of those discussions. It took the death in 2010 of a young teen from Puerto Rico, hit by a stray bullet, finally to focus governmental attention on the need for security at Coki. The cruise lines, in particular Carnival Cruise Line, demanded greater security before allowing tours to return to Coki Point and Coral World. As a result, we finally obtained a relatively regular police presence. It is a shame that the stimulus for an improvement in security measures had to be such a tragic incident.

There have been a number of other improvements in the last 5 ½ years. The Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (formerly Housing, Parks, and Recreation) improved the beach markedly with the construction of the charming and neat pavilions that now house a number of different vendors providing a variety of goods and services to beachgoers. The portion of

the Coki Point Road, between the mangrove and the back of Pineapple Village, has been raised and reconstructed in concrete with proper drainage so it no longer turns into an impassable lake with one downpour. An effort to control taxi traffic has begun with the granting of a concession to a new group called H&H Taxi which is to handle the dispatch of taxis at the beach. However, there is still much work to be done to make visiting Coki Point Beach or Coral World the same pleasant experience residents and visitors have when visiting Magens Bay Beach or even the newer Smith Bay Beach.

Our primary areas of concern, in no order of priority, remain:

Traffic congestion

Taxis

Parking

Barkers

General visual appeal

Condition of the road

Criminal activity

Many of these problems are interrelated.

We are hopeful that the addition of a taxi dispatcher at the beach, in combination with the police presence, will provide better control over traffic congestion much of which is caused by taxis parking in areas intended for drop-off or passage. Also contributing are other vehicles parked alongside the road which is already too narrow for the volume of traffic. It is our understanding that H&H will enforce a line to which taxi drivers who wish to pick up at the beach will go after dropping off. This would keep the road open, ensure availability of transportation for beachgoers when needed, and allocate passengers to drivers fairly. The effort is too new for us to pass judgment. Change in habit and attitude is difficult to implement and requires some patience. Mostly what we need is cooperation by the taxi drivers and their acceptance of the new program and clarity and consistency in application of rules and procedures. We also need consistent police enforcement.

We have learned over the years that cooperation is what is frequently lacking. For example, to allow two safaris to pass one another entering and exiting Coral World, we permitted the Government to take some of our leased land and pave it, thereby widening the road as it passes the bathhouse. The immediate reaction of taxi drivers, was to use the increased width for parking, negating any advantage to traffic circulation from the widening of the road. The police could have and should have intervened by ticketing the taxis that parked illegally (there is a sign that says very clearly No Parking). By ticketing the vehicles, the police would have stopped the illegal parking promptly, but this never happened. Since H&H has taken on the dispatch responsibility, it seems that there is less illegal parking in this area.

Coral World also allowed the government to extend a concrete path from the bathhouse into Coral World's parking lot. This path was to accommodate foot traffic. It was not intended to

serve as a drop off point for the beach as any vehicle stopping right there completely blocks the driveway into Coral World. In response to our complaint, the previous Commissioner of DSPR installed a sign stating no embarkation or disembarkation at this point. One day that sign disappeared and we are back where we started.

To cooperate with the new taxi program, we agreed to give H&H two spaces in our parking lot, thereby extending the H&H concession into our property. Pursuant to an agreement with H&H, this was to have no effect on our longstanding relationships with taxi drivers carrying our ship tours or taxis bringing guests to Coral World who had arranged to wait for or pick up their passengers at a later time. In other words, drivers dropping off guests at Coral World would not need to stand in line to pick up guests or pay a fee for doing so. We are currently encountering some confusion with this process as drivers who do bring guests to Coral World are being charged a fee for picking up. These unhappy drivers apparently are taking their business elsewhere, not a good result for us. Clearly, the new program is a work in progress.

Our hope and expectation with this arrangement was that the police would be able to control those taxis using our parking lot to drop passengers for the beach who then occupy precious parking spaces that should go to our guests and taxis transporting them. Neither the presence of the H&H dispatcher nor the police has stopped this activity entirely. There are particular drivers who routinely treat Coral World's parking lot as if it were their own, occupying parking designated for Coral World guests. The problem has led to very unpleasant arguments in front of visitors, hardly the lasting impression we want to leave with tourists.

For many years, we struggled with beachgoers using our parking lot with no intention of visiting Coral World. Indeed, barkers from the beach often encouraged visitors to use Coral World's parking lot and even went so far as to take \$10 for the parking from these tourists. The money went into their own pockets. In response, we finally had to start giving out parking permits to paid guests and to arrange for one of the towing companies to boot violators. We also had to mount warning signs throughout the property which in itself creates a certain unpleasantness. The process has not always been smooth, but we do have better control over our parking situation with respect to private vehicles. In addition, the family that owns the property just before the cemetery has organized a parking lot where beach visitors can park for a fee. This also has alleviated the stress on our parking lot.

Speaking of barkers, I understood that more control would be exerted over the activities of barkers with the placement of a DSPR manager at the beach. As I understand the rules, barkers are supposed to wear some identification showing the vendor for whom they work and dress in some sort of uniform, if only a t-shirt, that represents their business. There are some who do. Unfortunately, there are far too many whose dress and manner continues to be intimidating to visitors. The barkers still line the road awaiting vehicles as they come over the rise again creating congestion. And now a new kiosk has surfaced renting glass-bottom kayaks right at the edge of the road. So after all the money and effort to bring order to the beach entry, we are once again seeing random kiosks and chairs occupied by barkers among others along the road preventing easy passage of vehicles.

Trudie Prior

h to the beach
d area. The
ce at the back
argaritaville
with new

wire, but the grassy verge at the base of the wall continues to look unkempt. Just before the rise to the beach, on the right you have a house and yard that are total eyesores. The house does not look habitable and yet it is inhabited. It is hard to believe that there is no public health or other law that would govern the situation. On the left sit vehicles and boats in various states of repair. And then you see the line of barkers.

The new concrete portion of the Coki Point Road is a blessing. We are sorry to report, however, that most of the road continues to be full of potholes. They are filled from time to time but as soon as the rains come, the potholes wash out again. One of the worst spots right now is just before the concrete section when approaching from the Smith Bay Road. The asphalt has given way at the joint with the new concrete section creating such a big hole that most vehicles must move to the right lane to avoid the hole.

While we are grateful for the police presence, I continue to hear of drug dealing on the beach. The dealing in our parking seems to have abated. The police generally position themselves at the side of the road by the boat launch. As far as I know, they do not patrol the beach. I suggest that there is no stopping the drug deals without beach patrols.

In sum, there has been progress. Government and the private sector must continue to work together to address the lasting problems. Coki Point Beach and Coral World are important assets to the community and to tourism. They deserve attention and we are grateful for yours.

Respectfully submitted,

Trudie Prior

Trudie Prior
President and General Manager
Coral World Ocean Park