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The Honorable Myron D. Jackson
31st Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building
St. Thomas, USVI
00804

Dear Senator Jackson:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at the March 27, 2015 meeting of the Committee on Culture, Historic Preservation, Youth and Recreation, the topic being a status of Government owned properties within the territory. My testimony will be specific to Government House and Estate Catherineberg on St. Thomas. Allow me to give you my personal history as it pertains to these historic gems. During the Christmas Holidays in 2004, I was hired by the Turnbull Administration to design a floral centerpiece for a Christmas reception at Government House. My first impression of the ballroom, the condition of the “collection” and the existing decorations resulted in a colorful explosion on my part. Needless to say, I was moved to profusely and sincerely apologize to the staff at Government House once I collected myself. This less than auspicious start was the beginning of my tenure as the volunteer and self – appointed curator for both Government House and to a lesser extent Estate Catherineberg.

Over the course of two years I worked closely with James O'Bryan, the St. Thomas -St. John Administrator and Angela Belfon, the Protocol Officer. Together we developed a plan to restore the antiquities and art collections in the Government House Ballroom and Dining Room. During that time the press and public commented on Governor Turnbull's antiquities purchases at local auctions. Little that they knew, the executive mansion's nominal “collection” consisted solely of one reproduction suite of furniture in the ballroom and seven gilded mirrors. The public did not know that official affairs of state were hosted on plastic folding tables covered by tablecloths. I discovered a sad state of affairs – government owned antique furniture was damaged and stored in less than optimal locations. Priceless art (to include original Pissarro's and Albert Daniels were re-discovered, recovered, reframed and rehung in more prominent display. The mahogany floors were restored, crystal chandeliers cleaned, walls repainted. The second floor courtyard was rehabilitated and landscaped. Concurrently Mrs. Belfon and I revised and updated the Farrelly Inventory and created

curatorial and maintenance policies and standards for Government House. By the end of Governor Turnbull's second term, the entire ballroom was restored as well as significant portions of the entire residence. It was Gov. Turnbull's hope that these new policies for maintenance and practices at the house would be retained as standard operational procedures, despite the inhabitant of Government House. The housekeeping and maintenance staff at Government House were willing and eager to learn and understand the importance of proper collection maintenance and upkeep. Indeed, the dedicated staff was an integral part of the total transformation of Government House.

I offer this brief history as a backdrop to my testimony about the future of Government House and to a lesser extent Estate Catherineberg. As a community we must appreciate and cherish the significant cultural and historic landmarks and collections which are the birthright of all Virgin Islanders. As a government we sadly miss opportunities to enhance and preserve our built and artistic environment. We all hear the sincere pronouncements as to the importance of cultural tourism, but we always seem at a loss as to how to begin with the gems we already have in our possession. As executive staff grows and the need for additional office space is needed, the government is slow to acquire additional surrounding real estate on Government Hill. As an example when both the neighboring the Paiewonsky and Knud Hansen houses were offered for sale, we failed to act and both properties are now owned by private individuals.

Another topic I am prepared to discuss today, is the curatorial needs as well as what I consider the optimal use for Estate Catherineberg. I am also prepared to discuss an appropriate dwelling to be used as the official residence for the Governor of the Virgin Islands. I welcome the opportunity to share my thoughts on how we may best utilize and restore historic spaces to showcase local antiquities. Thank you for the committee's invitation and the opportunity to address these important matters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Felipe Ayala, Jr.', with a large, stylized flourish extending to the left.

Felipe Ayala, Jr.