



CORAL BAY COMMUNITY COUNCIL

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Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety

Testimony before COMMITTEE HEARING

Thursday, November 9, 2023

St. John, US Virgin Islands

Good Afternoon, Honorable Chairman Kenneth Gittens and the Senators on the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, and all others present. Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this hearing.

I am Sharon Coldren, the volunteer President of the Coral Bay Community Council, a 501c3 nonprofit organization serving the people of Coral Bay, known also as CBCC. This month we are celebrating our 20th anniversary. serving the community. In 2003, we started with 200 members providing support and undertaking volunteer activities and today we have 469 voting members and growing. Over the years we have collectively delivered, with grants and our residents, over \$5million in infrastructure improvements and environmental and other services to remote Coral Bay, in cooperation with government agencies and residents. Our organization also participates in the St. John Citizen Integration Team (the CIT) a long-standing group that meets monthly with the island administrator, police and justice officials to discuss safety concerns.

For background, - CBCC has over time provided people with encouragement to form neighborhood watches, record car licenses, and be openly friendly with all who come into their neighborhoods. We have also occasionally, as warranted, hosted meetings between local business establishments and the police.

The well-being of all 1,000 Coral Bay residents and the additional 2,000 tourists visiting at most times is a constant priority for CBCC. Of course, the safety of everyone on St. John is equally important – another 3500 to 15000 persons at any given time.

Thank you for inviting the CBCC to testify today about the St. John community's concerns for the safety of our residents and visitors. I would like to cover a few key points and look forward to potential future discussions about improvements.

With over 30 years of living here – I could share stories of many individual events – but I will spare you that. I am here today to help look for ways we can collectively improve the systems and processes that protect people from injury and crime – and make a safer community for the future. I will start with some basics.

Communications

First, we need effective communications tools. Do you know that in Coral Bay, our affordable housing community and most of the Southside along route 107 does not have functional cell service? Yes, there are workarounds through WIFI, but those don't usually work when WAPA is out. Coral Bay needs urgent attention to have full communications where most of our year-round residents and emergency responders live.

Government agencies and partners are working on better emergency and Wi-Fi networks. Please be sure investment planned in Coral Bay is directed to the locations that are underserved, rather than locations of convenience.

Traffic safety

St. John used to have plentiful signs and messaging that the top legal speed on St. John was 20 mph. This was established with a waiver from the police commissioner, as is provided for in the VI Code in the speed limits section. Irma Maria removed all our road signage, and it seems this speed limit may have been forgotten. Public Works has replaced a couple of the 20 mph signs, but many more are needed along with messages and enforcement. The current terrible pothole condition of our roads also makes going slow important.

Very few of us have avoided being hit head-on by a tourist. It is only when both vehicles are going slow that you can avoid injury when meeting head-on around a blind curve. St. John also has cows, donkeys, sheep and goats roaming freely on our roads – which at higher speeds is more unsafe for the animals and people. Slow speed is doubly critical to avoid injury. Fewer accidents would also free up police for other safety duties.

I acknowledge that it is not popular among some people to “drive slow” – they want to make “a quick trip to town or work”, but it would be worth it for society if everyone could live to be my age or older without suffering the consequences and regrets of a terrible accident. And there have been some on St. John.

Police Response and Followup

In general, we do hear that police officers respond when called via 911. However, it is also generally the case that people feel frustrated because they don't see “next steps” happening by the police or by the Justice Department without their prodding, and even then, little success. True or not, That's the word on the street.

Crime – assaults and personal injury (and worse)

It is very hard to get people to report assaults – because the victims often feel the effort involved and the feedback they get in the police and justice process is ineffective and demeaning. They don't feel heard or protected. When I was invited to testify, one of our board members wrote out a list of about 10 assaults or fatal incidents within the last two years on St. John and the perceptions that nothing is being done by police or the Justice department. Also, common feeling is that the public and the victims and victim's families does not know what is happening or get follow-up on incidents. There is frustration. The public hears too many stories that perpetrators aren't arrested or are out on bail, received only

parole or lenient sentences even though they committed violence. This perception also can lead people to “retaliation” or arming themselves as the only available solution.

Standard for Police Service must be high, and accountable to the people

From A CBCC board member, whose father was a police officer: “While many of these incidents are known to me via word of mouth, Facebook and directly from the victims, In every community I have lived in, the police are accountable to the public. They are required to keep the public safe and informed accurately about crimes in the community. [On St. John] **There is an overall feeling that nothing will be done anyway which does not deter criminals from acting.**” This is our fundamental fear.

Crime - house and car break-ins, car theft

They happen, some get reported, some don't.

On St. John, we like to think that the perpetrators come from St. Thomas particularly when it happens in September and October – which has historically been our “worst” house break-in time in Coral Bay, presumably because some people are laid off from work in the slow time. But in reality, we do not know who commits these crimes. It could be our neighbors’ teenagers. It could be others who live here, or even visitors. So if the crimes are reported, the police come out, finger prints get taken. Then what happens? Stolen cars are often found via Facebook and friends driving around, but some aren't recovered or are wrecked. It would be helpful to have some kind of public reporting beyond press releases, which has not always been helpful.

Also, since it seems likely that the sale of stolen goods like TVs or electronics or cars would take place in the larger St. Thomas marketplace, is there an active police process to have car barge surveillance?

Crime – armed robbery

These happen – including one in broad daylight at a prominent jewelry store in Cruz Bay mid-season, apparently with a getaway car. How could they not have been apprehended, given our limited road system, we all wonder? What efforts have the investigators made? How are our systems failing? How could they be improved?

Drugs Availability – sold openly

I am told there are still open sales of drugs in Cruz Bay on the streets in front of the police station by school, offered to tourists (who are sometimes shocked). Open sales in Coral Bay too. Why wouldn't local and FBI undercover agents posing as tourists making buys easily stop these sales? Is it because the legal consequences of being caught making individual sales of illegal drugs are so lenient its not worth the police effort. I don't know – but with the risks of fentanyl and other poisonings – the dealers should be pushed off the streets. This should not be a way to make easy money.

Illegal Immigration and drug boats

At times in the recent past, there have been speed boats and fast dinghies that smuggle people and drugs from the BVI and St. Martin into Coral Bay and probably other USVI ports. Seeing these activities – easily visible from the homes in the hills surrounding the bay or from shore, wondering about them – reduces overall confidence in police and law enforcement. Why don't the Police and Customs and Border patrol see these things in plain sight – in repeated visible patterns?

Mental illness

This is a complex issue that I won't attempt to cover, except to say the following with respect to public safety and violence. Over the course of the 30 years, I have lived in Coral Bay, we have almost always had at least one person who spends their time out in public but is suffering from mental illness that makes them hostile to normal interactions with strangers. This is dangerous for all.

We who live here learn to how avoid interaction, warn tourists, and try to balance our desire to be kind with our need for personal safety. Visitors or someone having a bad day or who doesn't see this person hanging out near the store or trash dropoff can end up in a very scary argument and dangerous situation. These are daily occurrences, perhaps in any community. But as I look back over the decades here, this never ended well. Someone gets badly hurt or dead. Please let's find a way to break the pattern with positive actions to help the individuals and relieve their mental pain before they end up on the street– and keep all people safe from violence. This is our societal responsibility.

The Crime Reporting/Accountability Process and Department of Justice

What does a person on St. John have to do to pursue getting someone charged with a crime – when the assailant is known? Often over the years I have heard from people that they were told they had to go to the Justice Department on St. Thomas to get charges filed for assault, rape or other crimes of violence, and they had to wait to do that until they had a written police report which takes a few days because it has to be handled on St. Thomas before it is available at the Cruz Bay police station – and that is assuming it is available at the front desk in the station (or someone knows about it) after you have found a place to park in Cruz Bay if you came from Coral Bay. People lose a work day or more – as the victim.

I am aware I do not know the current system well – but I would like to suggest that opportunities be explored to improve the process and publicize improvements, so that more crimes will be reported and charged and convicted. And this in turn might publicly highlight the risks of committing crimes and reduce crime.

Another possible positive step would be emailing or texting completed crime reports back to victims quickly; another would be having a Justice Department employee come to St. John weekly – if there is a requirement of contact – and/or making it possible to interact virtually to complete the charging process.

Thank you very much for listening and for this opportunity to share public concerns. I hope this will create some additional opportunities to discuss improvements that will be visible to the general public on St. John and increase people's sense of public safety and security – and protection by the police and justice system.

Submitted by

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