

Coco Cay's critics 'need to be cautious'

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Activist Heather Carey, of Raising Awareness about the Bahamas Landfill (RABL), denounced the project in a Facebook post, calling it another example of how the cruise ship industry does very little to benefit the Bahamas.

She wrote: "Royal Caribbean plans Massive Overhaul of Coco Cay. Dredging in order to accommodate the world's largest cruise ships. A massive marine park. Helium Air Balloon Rides. A fresh water pool."

"Sad. We cannot give away any more of our beautiful Bahamas to these bottomless pits." However, responding to those concerns, Mr Weech insisted the dredging needed to facilitate the new pier expansion was approved and carried out "some time back".

Mr Weech indicated that operators of Coco Cay first contacted the BEST Commission in late 2015 on plans to expand its docking facility.



AN ARTIST'S impression of how Coco Cay would look.

He said the operators insisted the existing dock could no longer service the cruise line's operations, which he said they claimed was expanding at the time.

"The problem of course was providing access to the

cay," he said.

Mr Weech said the operators submitted its first EIA on the proposed expansion between late 2015 and early 2016; and received approval a few months later.

He added officials from

his office, including himself on a few occasions, visited the small cay to ensure all terms agreed to were being adhered to.

Further clarifying Coco Cay's expansion Mr Weech said a second EIA was

carried out in May 1st year after Royal Caribbean submitted plans to expand the existing operations and facilities.

"This is the proposal we are still working through," he said.

"There is an existing landscape that they want to make adjustments to. There are facilities on the island that they want to improve on and they've approached us," Mr Weech added.

That expansion, according to Royal Caribbean, includes "Daredevil's Peak," which will become North America's tallest slide at 135 feet; a fully vertical, high-speed slide called the Screeching Serpent; 1600-foot-long zip line ending in a splash water landing; sports amenities and several beach areas.

Royal Caribbean president and CEO Michael Bayley, in the same USA Today article confirmed the project has been in development for three years.

He added once completed, Coco Cay will be unique for a cruise ship private island.

Royal Caribbean is expected to present its full plan for Coco Cay this evening during a town hall forum in Great Harbour Cay, Berry Islands.

Officials from the BEST Commission are expected to attend.

GOMEZ: WHY NO MORE SALES OF CAYS TO PRIVATE BUYERS?

By RASHAD ROLLE
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FORMER State Minister for Legal Affairs Damian Gomez called on Prime Minister Dr Hubert Minnis yesterday to explain why Crown cays won't be sold to private buyers anymore.

Dr Minnis announced the policy shift in parliament during his mid-budget speech Tuesday. It is not clear if the cays will now be leased instead of sold.

Mr Gomez said: "We don't even know if they have done a study to show whether this will impact government revenues at all, nor do we know if there will be leases.

"If these are uninhabited cays, what is the significance of keeping it uninhabited? Why is that such a big deal? They are changing the policy so why do they feel motivated to do this? When cays have been sold, in most cases the purchasers have developed the cay and created employment. There is that growth to the economy that you are now saying you are ending. That's irrational."

He continued: "It doesn't seem to be a scientific approach he's taken. In general they seem to have a knee jerk approach to their activities. If I were him, I would have given an historical overview of what was obtained from how many

purchases in a particular year so the public would at least have an idea about the significance of abandoning that project and adopting a different one."

For his part, former Attorney General Alfred Sears praised Dr Minnis for his professed commitment to increased transparency in Crown land dealings. But he called on him to go a step further and divest himself of Crown land powers completely.

"In the interest of transparency and accountability, I'm calling upon the government to discontinue the prerogative power of the prime minister as minister responsible

for land," he said.

"This prerogative power that two million plus acres of Crown land could be alienated from the Bahamian people at the discretion of one individual without any cabinet oversight or parliamentary oversight is inconsistent with modern democratic practices, accountability and transparency and the government in order to regain public trust should put all Crown land under a public authority guided by published policies from cabinet after consultation with civil society and an annual report of the lease and transfer of all Crown land should be gazetted and disclosed in an annual

report to the House of Assembly.

"There should also be a disclosure of all Crown lands that would have been disposed of in the last ten years, to whom and on what terms. Out of the controversy over Oban Energies we should begin to lay the foundation for the rational, transparent management of the natural resources of the commonwealth of the Bahamas which includes Crown land."

In addition to ceasing the sale of Crown lands to private people, Dr Minnis said the government will "preserve the seabed for the Crown, approving only leases of it."

The government, he said,

"will retain for the Crown a Crown reserve between ocean/sea, front/inland lake property, granted for private development where un-alienated Crown land exists at the seashore, to preserve windows to the sea and open green and beach front spaces for the enjoyment of the public."

He also said the government will "regularise long-term occupation of Crown land developed or cultivated by individual Bahamians and/or families at concessionary rates" and make Crown land available to Bahamian nationals for residential, commercial and touristic development, particularly in the Family Islands."



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