

Tracking Your Taxes: Park Pork?

February 9, 2010 - 12:05 PM | by: [William La Jeunesse](#)



If you are hoping to visit the newest crown jewel in America's park system chosen by Congress, throw away the car keys and open up your wallet. The 2,900 pristine acres of beachfront property were not cheap -- or even in the United States.

The property soliciting accusations of "pork" from critics is the Castle Nugent National Historic Park. It's in the U.S. Virgin Islands, about a thousand miles from Miami and an expensive jet ride to get there.

Two weeks ago, on a near party line vote, a huge Democratic majority in the House agreed to spend \$50 million to buy the former cotton plantation on the island of St. Croix.

"This is a beautiful and important natural and cultural resource that is in danger of being lost forever," Virgin Island delegate, Donna Christiansen, told House colleagues in January.

"The site to be designated as the Castle Nugent National Historic Park continues to be heralded as one of the last pristine areas in the region." The mixture of dry forest and rangeland offers picturesque views of the Caribbean Sea, but good luck getting there. Critics in Congress say the purchase is wasteful and irresponsible, especially with unemployment at 10 percent and the nation in debt.

"Now is not the time to spend up to \$50 million dollars of the taxpayers' money to buy nearly 3,000 acres of beachfront property on a Caribbean Island," said Rep. Doc Hastings, (R-Wash.), ranking Republican on the House Natural Resources Committee. "We can't afford a price tag for a new park in St Croix, just as many Americans will never be able to afford a

visit there."

Democrats approved the purchase, even though the National Park Service has yet to complete a study on the purchase.

"We don't have the money to do this," said Rep Jason Chaffetz, (R - Utah). "Currently the National Park Service has an estimated \$9 billion in backlog maintenance on existing parks. Why should the people of Iowa, Rhode Island or California or Utah have to continue to pay and supplement the people there on St Croix for this property?"

But a majority on St. Croix, where the economy depends on tourism, support the purchase.

"It allows us to maintain the natural beauty of St. Croix and also at the same time it allows for the historic nature of the property," Virgin Islands Governor, John de Jongh Jr., told Fox News.

The land is currently used as a cattle ranch. It includes an estate house and two row houses where the owners kept slaves that worked on the plantation. Most of the land is owned by the Gasperi family, who bought the land in the 1950's and approached the U.S. Government about four years ago about buying it.

"It's beautiful, it's lush, it's green," Mauro Gasperi said. "It contains a beautiful reef in front that we want to maintain as clean and as pristine as when we first bought it."

The Gasperi family maintains it wants to sell the land to the U.S. government in order to protect it from developers. Critics in Congress say there is nothing stopping them from doing that. They don't have to sell, or the family could impose a conservation easement on the land, preventing development forever.

"Sometimes you have to say, enough is enough," Rep. Rob Bishop of Utah told the House in January. "We heard it is (the Gasperi's) desire that this land not be developed, but preserved in its current condition. It seems to me they are in the perfect position to accomplish that goal as landowners." The Senate is now expected to take up a similar bill.