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Officials Tour Coral Bay as Start of Watershed Management Project



Written by Jaime Elliott
Monday, 06 August 2007



Anne Kitchell, from the Center for Watershed Protection, talks to Anita Nibbs of DPNR's division of Environmental Protection in Coral Bay. St. John Tradewinds News Photo by Jaime Elliott

Representatives of the Maryland-based national non-profit watershed protection agency Center for Watershed Protection toured Coral Bay last week in the first step toward curbing the tide of storm water erosion.

From July 31 through August 2, a group of six national and local representatives toured both private — with owners' permission — and public land sites in Coral Bay from the shoreline to the steep slopes of Upper Carolina Valley, to develop a storm water management plan.

Local and Federal Officials

The group consisted of two watershed planners from CWP; Jennifer Kozlowski, a coral management specialist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; two Department of Planning and Natural Resources representatives; and president of the Coral Bay Community Council Sharon Coldren.

"The team has gone to a number of sites that represent the many issues faced by the whole watershed," said Coldren.

Some developers, however, did not allow the group access to their property, including T-Rex St. John, which leased 10 acres of Moravian Church owned land in Coral Bay to reportedly construct a marina, hotel, commercial space and residences.

T-Rex's attorney David Bornn cited insurance and timing issues in his firm's refusal to allow the team access to the waterfront property.

"There are liability and knowledge concerns," said Bornn. "We simply can't do this at the drop of a hat."

The group was able to get an overview of the various storm water problems in the area and agreed that Coral Bay was an excellent site for the project, according to DPNR officials.

Coral Bay was chosen as the site of the pilot program because it "offers an excellent opportunity to highlight collaborative planning and leveraging of multiple federal and local agency efforts as well as protection to vulnerable coral reef resources," according to a DPNR press release.

While a number of plans have been devised over the years by various local agencies, this plan is the first to be supported locally and federally.

"There is a lot of interest and a lot of support in this pilot program," said Anne Kitchell, a watershed planner with CWP.

"There have been a lot of plans devised for this watershed — from visioning meetings to storm water studies — but this is different. This effort is going to pull together all these pieces into one watershed plan."

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Moving Forward

Instead of just creating a plan that will sit on a shelf, this latest effort will produce more of a road map for implementation practices, explained Kitchell.

"We're going to take everything and prioritize all the pieces," she said. "Everyone knows what the problems are, so let's think of how to make things work and move forward with this. That is what our organization does — we move watershed management forward."

One of the biggest problems facing scientists in this effort is the lack of a long-term plan for the island, explained Kitchell.

"Without a comprehensive plan, it makes it really hard to predict what is going to happen," she said. "We like to know what the future will look like. Just knowing there is going to be development doesn't help."

CWP officials only have about three weeks to move on this project, ensuring imminent action, Kitchell added.

"This is a short-term project for us," she said. "We have about three weeks total to put something together to show for this. And then hopefully it will continue after we leave."

V.I.-wide Model

Once a plan is devised, it will also serve as a model for other watersheds in the territory which face similar storm water threats, explained NOAA's Kozlowski.

"We hope this can serve as a showcase project," she said. "We'll take all the recommendations and input and create real solutions that can be implemented here and in other watersheds."

Officials are dedicated to making real change in the Coral Bay watershed through this project, Kozlowski added.

"We will come up with some practices and implement them for the first time in the Virgin Islands to actually make a change in the near future," she said. "We want to get these things off the table and on the ground."

A public meeting, co-hosted by CBCC and DPNR, to discuss the watershed management plan will be on Monday evening, August 6, at 6 p.m. at the John's Folly Learning Institute.

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