



Ministerial Statement
by
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UNESCO Advisory Mission to the
Historic Town of St. George's and Related Fortifications.

Friday, March 8th, 2024

Mr. Speaker, I rise this morning to announce that the Government of Bermuda has invited the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization more commonly known as UNESCO for an Advisory Mission to our World Heritage Site – the Historic Town of St. George's and Related Fortifications.

Mr. Speaker before I detail the purpose of this Mission, I would like first to give background on how the former capital was inscribed some 24 years ago.

After a lengthy concerted effort and application process by local heritage stakeholders in the late 1990's, the Historic Town of St. George's, and Related Fortifications – approximately 19 different forts – were inscribed as World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in December 2000 and retroactively given the designation of outstanding universal value in 2014.

UNESCO views the Town as “an authentic and one of the earliest examples of an English colonial town in the New World. Its associated fortifications graphically illustrate the development of English military engineering from the 17th to the 20th century, adapted to consider the development of artillery over this period. Some of these forts are unique as surviving examples of the first defensive works built by early European colonists, few examples of which now remain intact. The later associated forts represent an excellent example of a continuum of British coastal fortifications.” **Mr. Speaker**, I have quoted that statement directly from UNESCO itself.

Mr. Speaker, during this inscription process another piece was added – a World Heritage Site “buffer zone.” This Buffer Zone protects the Town and Forts via legislation and policies such as the Development and Planning Act 1974 and the Bermuda Plan 2018 – recent amendments to both approved by this Legislature. The purpose of which is to set complimentary legal and/or customary restrictions on use and development within the surrounding area of the Town to give an added layer of protection.

This Buffer Zone (not including the town itself) spans some 746 hectares or 3 miles and vastly ranges from the Town itself, across to Tobacco Bay, then to the Royal Artillery Field or as locals call it “RA”, then back to the Town itself.

Mr. Speaker in 2000 to support and manage the World Heritage Site, a standing body was established known as the World Heritage Committee which comprised of various local entities including representatives from the Corporation of St. George’s, the Bermuda National Trust, the St. George’s Foundation, and other such relevant organisations.

This body is supposed to advise the Government on recommended management plans and development proposals in the area. However, the Committee has not held meetings since the Covid-19 Pandemic attributed to several reasons including a revaluation of the Committee’s structure moving forward.

Mr. Speaker, this Legislature and the greater public understand the former Capital is in dire need of an economic revitalisation. Hence the rationale for the Government designating the area as an Economic Empowerment Zone, agreeing for a designated NCL ferry during peak tourist season and other incentives to assist the Corporation in driving investment to the Town.

This attempted revitalisation for the Town spans successive Governments and both sides of the aisle have demonstrated agreement that the Town needs help – although our methods may differ.

Mr. Speaker regardless of our differences, I am sure both the Government and the Opposition agree that a part of this economic renaissance must involve some sort of development. Anyone who understands basic economics knows that construction helps stimulate growth and as such, multiple major construction projects have begun over the last decade such as the St. Regis Development and The St. George’s Marina Project with the goals of increasing immediate investment in the short term while simultaneously increasing Tourism investment in the long-term.

Mr. Speaker, UNESCO has noticed this change in philosophy for the Island and has recently made their position known to the Government through several correspondences.

Acknowledging UNESCO’s renewed interest for the Olde English colonial town and former Capital, the Government has invited representatives of UNESCO to the Historic Town to perform an Advisory Mission for the purpose of:

1. Conducting an overall assessment of the Town of St. George’s World Heritage Property.
2. Review any current or proposed developments in the Area.
3. Review and advise on the Planning protections and management measures currently established in legislation and those intended to be; and

4. Engage with decision makers and relevant stakeholders involved in the maintenance and preservation of the World Heritage Site.

Mr. Speaker, representatives of UNESCO **have not been** to the Town of St. George's since:

- the Zenith and Horizon Cruise ships used to routinely berth at the docks.
- since the Town's Tuesday Harbour Nights existed.
- since the Aunt Nea's Inn was open and receiving guests.
- since the closure and reopening of the St. George's Club; and
- since the Bank of Bermuda was acquired by HSBC.

Mr. Speaker, all these activities amongst a plethora of others happened over a twenty-four (24) year period. Older than some people presently involved in the political and heritage conservation spheres today.

Times have changed since UNESCO's only visit in 2000, therefore it is intended for this Advisory Mission to allow the Government, Corporation of St. George's and any relevant stakeholder to directly discuss the overall direction for the Towne; address any concerns the entity may have; and seek its opinion on the Town.

Mr. Speaker, representatives of UNESCO will arrive later this month and stay for a five (5) day duration – with full expenses paid for by the Government as required by the World Heritage Convention whom Bermuda is a signatory.

Yesterday, I and the Ministry team met with the Corporation of St. George's and MP Renee Ming the representative for Constituency 1 to share the details of the visit.

Over the coming days, technical officers from the Ministry will be reaching out to various stakeholders outside the Government involved in the Town's strategic direction including those in business, heritage, and environmental spheres amongst others to provide information to UNESCO during this once in a quarter century initiative.

After the Advisory Mission concludes, UNESCO will produce a report to the Government and said report will be shared with this Honourable House and the public.

Mr. Speaker, the World Heritage Site designation is internationally recognised. The Bermuda Tourism Authority leverages the status in its efforts to improve the Island's Cultural Tourism initiatives. However, if there are no businesses open, poor infrastructure, dilapidated buildings owned by individuals, outdated policies and legislation and no financial support from outside entities – essentially no incentives to retain designation; how would a revitalisation for the area occur?

This is the feedback the Government is seeking from UNESCO – in their view, what would be best suited for our Historic Town?

Mr. Speaker, before I close, I just would like to mention that this Government wants to work with UNESCO. We want the entity's feedback. We want the Advisory Mission to be a success. But more importantly, our priority is the people of St. George's and the people of Bermuda.

Thank You **Mr. Speaker!**