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St. Kitts South East Peninsula

## Skerritt says there no record of Government ever owning land at the Southeast Peninsula, gives history of the area

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When completed the Park Hyatt St. Kitts will become the first new hotel to be constructed on the South East Peninsula since the Dr. Kennedy Simmonds highway opened up that area of St. Kitts to the public in 1989, some 24 years ago.

Minister of Tourism and International Transport, Sen. the Hon. Richard Skerritt speaking at the ground breaking ceremony for the multi-million dollar resort at Banana used the opportunity to give a history of the area.

He said: "Some of you would know that, prior to the construction of the highway into the area, three small hotels operated at various periods on this site. I am therefore taking this opportunity to pay tribute to those entrepreneurs, who such a long time ago shared a vision for resort tourism in this area. I speak of the Bowers

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family who built a small ten-room hotel on the neighbouring Cockleshell Beach back in the 1970's, and of Mrs. Margo Schmidt who built a small exclusive hotel here on Banana Bay around the same period.

Both of those hotels were accessible only by sea at that time and they operated side by side for about ten years or so before closing because of ongoing financial losses. I also want to pay tribute to Colin Pereira, his family, and their business partners at Ocean Terrace Inn, who later purchased both properties and developed the OTI Banana Bay annex which operated successfully for a few years before it was purchased by the famous Butch Stewart of Sandals in 1988. Unfortunately Sandals never developed the much anticipated resort that Butch and the Government of the day promised to build here, and the site was eventually sold by Sandals at a windfall price to the Christophe Harbour developers in 2007, nearly twenty years later. Nevertheless, I expect that the Bowers, Schmidt and Pereira families would all be pleased to see their tourism dreams for this area being given a major rebirth through this Park Hyatt project.

The wider area of the Southeast Peninsula which is today being developed as Christophe Harbour was in the 1800's and early 1900's part of two sugar estates, one called Flemings and the other Salt Pond - Grape Tree Bottom. In the 1940s the two failing sugar estates were bought by Dr. Arthur Wilkin a local dentist who during his retirement lived at Salt Pond and kept animals, planted coconuts, and mined both the two Salt Ponds for salt, which he shipped from a dock in Whitehouse Bay. Dr. Wilkin sold the whole area in 1958 to a retired Canadian, Bruce Wiggins, who then carved it up over the next several years, selling most of it to a variety of local and foreign private investors.

One of the major local firms Wiggins did business with was the law firm of the late Fred Kelsick QC, and his step son Charles Wilkin QC, the grandson of Dr Wilkin.

Charles and his business partners, Colin Pereira and Jackie Cramer, were among the few local land owners who, long before the Christophe Harbour Development emerged, had shown confidence in the future of the Southeast Peninsula by starting their own real estate development project at Turtle Beach. I expect that Charles and all other land owners in this area, old and new, will be pleased to see such a major hotel brand as the Park Hyatt now moving into their neighbourhood.

Records show that by 1987 when the construction of the highway first commenced, the approximately 4000 acre peninsula was entirely privately owned by more than 30 individuals, companies, trusts or partnerships. There is no record of Government ever owning lands at the Peninsula. So it is not true that Christophe Harbour acquired their lands on the Peninsula from Government. What is true, however, is that since the Christophe Harbour Development was first announced by our Government eight years ago, land prices in the Peninsula have more than quadrupled in price, and a number of local and foreign based land owners have cashed in handsomely during the US\$50 Million Christophe Harbour land procurement phase when approximately 2400 acres of land were acquired, including this hotel site.

Writing in a 1986 environmental assessment report prior to the construction of the proposed southeast peninsula access road, the late Dr. Edward Towle of Island Resources Foundation had this to say:

I quote – 'The Environmental Assessment team began investigation of the Southeast Peninsula land ownership with a list of 12 owners provided by the Government, but has now identified over 30 land owners. The current situation, with several large land holdings and many smaller ones, will present problems over time in establishing a consensus on various environmental issues, wildlife strategies, and the acquisition of land for public use and management as protected areas and recreational

areas.’ – End of quote.

Dr. Towle went on in his report to recommend the coming together of land owners and Government, in a development planning partnership, in order to achieve the type and scale of development that was most desirable for the Southeast Peninsula.

Two main points jumped out at me when I read this 27 year old report by Dr. Towle. One was that the Government of the day had decided to spend Millions of tax payer dollars to build a major access highway into an area of privately owned land for which the Government did not even keep an up-to-date land registry. The other point that struck home in my research was that, following the construction of the new highway, the chances of achieving a desirable master plan for development would be weak at best, because of the large number of land owners with varying interests and visions for the use of their individual land holdings. Clearly, some individual, group, or even government, needed to pull the land owners together, or to acquire a large portion of the land in order to develop and implement a comprehensive master plan. Needless to say, Dr Towle’s prediction has come to pass because it took 18 years after the highway was opened for the Christophe Harbour master-planned accumulation of land assets to begin, and a total of 24 years for the first credible international hotel project to break ground in this area.

The economic history of the SEP therefore bears out the Jewish proverb that “GOOD THINGS COMETH TO THOSE WHO WAITETH, AS LONG AS THOSE WHO WAITETH WORKETH LIKE HELL WHILE THEY WAITETH”.

Ladies and gentlemen, your Government has “worketh like hell” in recent years to build the partnership and co-ordination necessary to achieve this development. We have been working especially hard to attract credible

investors to undertake a number of economically and socially beneficial projects in the Southeast peninsula and elsewhere. As was predicted to be a critical need by Dr. Towle, this Park Hyatt resort project is the result of the coming together of a number of international and local individuals and groups, partnering with Government in order for this development to actually happen.

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