

MNRL minister declines to speak about report

Complaints commish's advice not followed

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At least one Virgin Islands resident wondered whether Deputy Premier Dr. Kedrick Pickering had read the latest special report from Complaints Commissioner Elton Georges, which described the mishandling of an application for land reclamation in Sea Cows Bay and called on the minister to apologise.

"I would like to know if he knows about this thing," said a caller to the National Democratic Party's radio programme on Monday.

"Yes, caller, he has seen it," said

Eilcene Parsons, the show's host, adding, "I don't think Dr. Pickering wants to get into this."

"Not at all, Mrs. P. Not at all," said Dr. Pickering, who, as the minister of natural resources and labour, has responsibility for land reclamation matters.

According to the report, which was made public at the Sept. 3 House of Assembly sitting, the complainant waited more than 10 years for a response to her application to reclaim land along the SCB waterfront. Meanwhile, other residents began filling in land before obtaining approval from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Labour, only to receive retroactive permission.

Mr. Georges submitted his preliminary report to the MNRL March 22, he wrote. In it, he rec-

ommended that the ministry process the complainant's application and that the minister write a letter of apology. Receiving no re-

sponse, Mr. Georges sent a reminder to the permanent secretary.

On May 8, Permanent Secre-

tary Ronald Smith Berkeley wrote to Mr. Georges to say that he had

Report see page 23

Report from page 6

discussed the recommendations with Dr. Pickering, and that he would draft an apology letter, among other actions.

But that did not happen, according to Mr. Georges.

So, on June 12, Mr. Georges wrote to the PS and others to inform them that he would be issuing a special report, and inviting them to include their comments.

But, he added, none were received.

Although responsibility for seabed matters belongs to the MNRL, the complainant's application process and other matters related to a SCB Development Plan were deferred by public officers to Julian Fraser, the Third District representative, because the project was seen as "the minister's baby," the report states.

The *Beacon* was unable to reach Mr. Fraser by press time yesterday, but he has been reported in

other media as defending his actions, saying he was directed by the Executive Council and calling Mr. Georges' report misleading and "malicious."

But Mr. Georges said in a statement issued Tuesday that officials still have not processed the application or apologised to the complainant.

"It is like adding to the injury," he said, adding, "Government had failed to respond to this lady over 12 years and still has not even issued an apology to her for the manifest in-

justice, much less approved her application, as was recommended."

On the Monday radio programme, Dr. Pickering said making the report public was part of Mr. Georges' duties as an ombudsman for the government.

"If he doesn't think enough has been done to respond to the nature of the complaint, then the process allows him to have the official complaint laid before the House, and once it is laid before the House it becomes a public

document," Dr. Pickering said.

"It's part and parcel of a democratic society to ensure that there are check and balances on the way government functions," he added.

His function as a check on government, however, relies on elected officials taking action on his special reports, Mr. Georges' Tuesday statement said.

"I continue to hope that with this step [of a report to the House] some benefit will emerge from this sorry tale," he said.