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THE BAHAMAS NATIONAL TRUST

FOR PLACES OF HISTORIC INTEREST AND NATURAL BEAUTY

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For Immediate Release:

Bahamas National Trust Position on the Bimini Bay Project.

The Bahamas National Trust has reviewed and commented on the environmental evaluation of Bimini Bay submitted to the government by Black & Veatch (a US-based engineering, consulting and construction company) in September and recently made public by the BEST Commission. Trust officials also conducted an independent site visit to Bimini, and participated in a tour of the project by the National Wetlands Committee, one of the BEST Commission's advisory bodies.

Bimini Bay is a 700-acre residential/resort development that - at full buildout - would include thousands of homes and condominiums, hotel and time-share units, a casino, marinas, golf course, shops and restaurants, and associated infrastructure. The master land use plan for the resort has been revised several times since 1997.

Amid all the controversy over the scale and character of this development in such an ecologically sensitive area, the Black & Veatch report confirms that no environmental management plan exists for the resort, no environmental impact assessment has been scheduled for the planned second phase, and there is "insufficient information" to make a judgement of the island's capacity to accommodate the proposed build-out.

The report also clearly states that because Bimini is relatively isolated on the western Great Bahama Bank, destruction of mangrove nursery habitat in the lagoonal complex "is likely to exert widespread influence on reef-fish communities in the area." Likewise, the associated sea grass beds provide nursery functions similar to that of mangroves, and support populations of bonefish and conch.

Mangrove forests are one of the world's most threatened tropical ecosystems. And scientists have shown that commercially important fish are twice as numerous when adult habitat is connected to mangroves. Therefore, to be effective, conservation efforts should protect connected corridors of mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs.

The Black & Veatch report states that “the current environmental impact assessment and supplements do not provide a sufficient basis upon which the BEST Commission can adequately assess the potential and likely degree of future environmental impacts.”

The Trust is deeply concerned that further development at Bimini Bay will lead inevitably to the loss of vital ecological functions that would be irrecoverable. It is our considered view that no second phase development should be approved without a further EIA undertaken by independent consultants. Based on our review of the first phase EIA, we agree with the finding by Black and Veatch that it is impossible to accurately assess the potential impact of any part of phase 2.

The Trust has also identified a direct conflict between the golf course planned for Phase 2, and the government's proposed marine protected area for Bimini. The proposed boundaries of the MPA overlap and encompass most of the second phase area authorized under the heads of agreement.

It is our considered opinion that construction of a golf course would be at the expense of large areas of mangroves, and at the expense of the ecological integrity of the marine protected area. We strongly recommend that the golf course NOT be approved, and that the government move quickly to declare the promised MPA.

A critical flaw in the report relates to the determination of suitable land for the proposed golf course. The report notes that the consultants “observed ecological conditions and utilized GIS mapping from aerial photographs” to make this determination. It recommends that the golf course be established only on hard land, and include buffer zones to protect sensitive adjacent areas.

But the Trust is satisfied from our site visits and from other scientific studies that the area proposed for a golf course is only marginally terrestrial, and is regularly interspersed with, and directly connected to, functional wetlands in the North Sound.

The nearly completed first phase of the Bimini Bay development provides valuable economic benefits to the local community, but we maintain our strong opposition to construction of a golf course. We believe that there is simply not enough upland area to place even a nine-hole course without significant destruction of productive mangrove ecosystems.

Even if a determination is made that some wetlands can be dispensed with in the interest of development, it is not possible to effectively buffer the sensitive and very productive East Wells and East River wetland systems. These areas are adjacent to and contiguous with the area that would be developed for the golf course.

In addition to the assessment deficiencies discussed above, there are also significant gaps in the history of the permitting process for this development, which the report duly notes. We recommend that a full and comprehensive review of all permits be undertaken for relevant government and non-government agencies before any new approvals are considered. And we further recommend that this review be made public.

We are pleased that our recommendation for a town meeting is being acted upon and that the people of Bimini will have an opportunity to review the permitting history and the Black & Veatch report. On our visits to the island, residents and local officials complained that they did not have any current information about the project, and asked that we make the case to the government for information sharing.

Government should always be prepared to defend its project review and approvals process, and be willing to undertake further reviews based on feedback from the public and the scientific community.

The Bahamas National Trust is not an anti-development agency. Economic growth is crucial for our communities, and we review each project on its own merit, assessing environmental impact on a case by case basis. We also take into account socioeconomic factors and the reality that Bahamians do need to make a living.

But Bimini is an isolated, relatively small, and ecologically fragile island system. At full build out, as presently planned, the Bimini Bay project is way out of scale. If allowed to proceed beyond current levels, it would cause irreparable harm to the ecosystem, and destroy Bimini's rapidly diminishing claim to being "the fishing capital of the Bahamas".

Note To Editors:

For more information contact The Executive Director, Phone 242 393 1317 email bnt@bnt.bs

The Bahamas National Trust (BNT) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1959. It is a non-governmental, non-profit organization, mandated with the development and management of the National Park System of The Bahamas.