



A structure being erected at Carlisle Trace, Coromandel Village, Cedros. Residents of the area and hunters are seeking answers about the validity of the structure and fence being constructed.



Residents and hunters at Carlisle Trace, Coromandel Village, Cedros. PICTURES KRISTIAN DE SILVA

Independent Senators debate THA Bill today

GAIL ALEXANDER

Independent Senators, whose votes are needed for passage of the Tobago House of Assembly (Amendment) Bill, will weigh in on debate on the Bill in the Senate today.

Following the January 25 THA election tie of six (PNM) and six (PDP) and assemblymen's recent repeated inability to elect a presiding officer to get the THA going, the Bill seeks to have fresh elections in Tobago and expansion of Tobago's seats from 12 to 15.

The bill was passed in the Lower House just over a week ago. It required a simple majority of votes and could have been passed there, with Government's 21 votes alone.

For passage in the Senate, however, the Bill requires the support of at least one Opposition or Independent Senator together with Government's 15 Senate votes.

The Opposition UNC rejected the Bill in the Lower House and its Senators won't be supporting it in the Senate today, the party's stated.

The UNC has stated there is no need for election as the law already holds mechanisms to resolve ties using recourse to the Standing Order of the Parliament. In that scenario, election of a presiding officer where there is a tie of votes can be resolved by drawing of straws.

Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi, however, yesterday maintained Government's argument that the changed law was needed for Tobago to manage its business following the tied elections and to have constitutionality of systems that would allow this.

He said the Opposition's arguments proposing using other law could not work for the THA which has its own law to elect a presiding officer. That usually involves a process where assemblymen would vote for the officer. But he noted the repeated failed attempts to elect the officer. The PDP last week sent the Clerk of the Assembly legal warning.

Once the Bill is passed and proclaimed, the seat arrangement is done by the Elections and Boundaries Commission.

When that's completed EBC will do a report to be sent to Parliament. This is debated and approved. THA's Chief Secretary (Ancil Dennis) will announce a date for the election.

There's been speculation this may be in May since the THA has to debate and pass its 2021 Budget and deliver it to the Finance Ministry by June for input to the planning process for the national 2021 Budget.

Al-Rawi, however, said if the THA Budget isn't ready by June, Finance has mechanisms to deal with the issue and proceed with Budget planning. Both PNM and PDP have been reinforcing with members on the "ground".

The PNM particularly which lost territory, moving from ten seats previously to six, has held a series of meetings in areas.

Suspected land grabber cuts down more trees at Chatham forest

RADHICA DE SILVA

radhica.sookraj@guardian.co.tt

Days after Cedros villagers called on the authorities to protect the Chatham Forest Reserve from a suspected land grabber, more trees are being chopped down.

And although the suspected land grabber was told by the forest rangers to desist from building a house on the forest edge, the roof of the house went up over the weekend.

Villagers of Coromandel Village, Cedros, are now demanding to know why the illegal land clearing has not stopped.

Residents say they were astonished to see continued construction of the house which is perched on an incline off Carlisle Road, Coromandel Village, Cedros.

Another villager who requested anonymity said, "We are certain that this man has no papers else he would have showed it to us a long time."

Agriculture Minister Clarence Rambharat said the allegations were under investigation, but councillor for the area Shankar Teelucksingh questioned why the authorities were dragging their feet in stopping the project.

He said, "We believe the Commissioner of State Lands should have stopped all forest clearance while the investigation is going on. Why is this continuing? Issue

a stop notice now and this will be used when the matter goes to court to show that he was given the advice to stop but he has broken the law by continuing," he said.

He noted that the forests and mangroves are protected by the State.

"We want to know whether the State agencies responsible for protecting the State's land assets are functional. Are they properly resourced and if not, why?" he added.

Teelucksingh said since Petrotrin closed down in 2018, land grabbers have been stealing acreages at Forest Reserve, Food Crop Road, Chatham and Greenhill Cedros.

When Guardian Media visited the area off Bowen Trace, Coromandel, Spanish speaking workers were seen chopping down forest trees and shrubs. A fence made with tree trunks and lined with six rows of barbed wire was erected along Carlisle Trace.

Residents say wild animals were being displaced by the forest clearing.

An official of the EMA confirmed with Guardian Media that an investigation is ongoing. The EMA is expected to issue a statement on the matter.

Efforts yesterday to contact Minister of Agriculture Clarence Rambharat and Commissioner of State Lands Banmattie Seecharan for comment proved futile.

Fonclaire Steel Orchestra opens Lotto outlet, gift shop

KEVON FELMINE

kevon.felmine@guardian.co.tt

Every year, steel band leaders are at the mercy of corporate T&T, pleading for funds for the National Panorama Competition, uniforms, tuning and arrangement.

But yesterday, NLCB Fonclaire Steel Orchestra took a bold step towards self-sufficiency, opening a Lotto booth and gift shop opposite its panyard along Dottin Street, San Fernando.

Incorporated as a Non-Profit Organisation to allow international sponsorship in 2019, the band registered as an enterprise in 2020 to become the economic hub within the Les Effort East community it occupies.

At yesterday's commissioning, managing director, Darren Sheppard said as a band executes its strategic plans, a car wash and bar are among their objectives.

Looking forward, Sheppard said the band wants to acquire all vacant property along Dottin Street as it seeks to expand. He said everything the band does would include the community. He said the opening of the Lotto



NLCB marketing and public relations officer Susan Worrell and San Fernando Mayor Junior Regrello cut the ribbon to formally open the NLCB Fonclaire Lotto Centre on Dottin Street, San Fernando, yesterday. Looking on from left are Miss San Fernando Eliesheva Phillips, managing director of Fonclaire Darren Sheppard and councillor Ryaad Hosein. PICTURE RISHI RAGOONATH

booth and gift shop already provided jobs.

"The name Fonclaire stands for Fonrose and Claire Streets. I am not knocking anybody; we did not go to the cinema to get our name. The name represents our community. It is who we are and what we are. Fonclaire has always been the engine that drives this community. We want

to make it the economic engine, hence the reason for venturing into this business," Sheppard said.

San Fernando Mayor Junia Regrello believes the Fonclaire model is something all steelbands should follow. CAL Skiffle Steel Orchestra, which Regrello leads, applied for a Lotto booth in 2003. However, Regrello said

the NLCB rejected its request because there were already several machines along Coffee Street.

"I would suggest that every steelband should have a Lotto outlet because that is how you empower the steel band to create sustainability, and this is something we should really consider," Regrello said.

NLCB's marketing and public relations officer, Susan Worrell first presented the idea of self-sufficiency to Fonclaire. Worrell said that when the band seeks donations, sponsors would also see they are helping themselves.

"Perhaps NLCB Fonclaire can be an example to other steel bands throughout T&T," Worrell said.

So far, the gift shop has snacks and T-shirts with more merchandise to come. From the time the operator turned on the machine, customers were lining up.

The building also pays tribute to the founding members of Fonclaire, including a large picture of the band's late leader Milton "Wire" Austin, the late arranger Ken "Professor" Philmore and Rudin "Redman" Austin with Sheppard.