

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
STRAW MARKET AUTHORITY BILL
MONDAY, 10TH OCTOBER, 2011
BY: ALFRED M. SEARS, M.P.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the people of the Fort Charlotte Constituency for affording me the privilege of being their voice in this House of Assembly. I extend my sympathy to the family of the late Sophia Olivia Greene, better known as "Pippy", especially her mother Loaynas Greene Bernard, stepfather, Wilfred Bernard, her siblings and the community of Pilgrim Avenue South. On behalf of the Fort Charlotte Community, I send best wishes to Mr. Peter Curry, President of the Senior Citizens Association of Fort Charlotte, who is recuperating at Doctors Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, the economic history of The Bahamas has recorded the different entrepreneurial paths taken by The Bahamians to economic and social mobility in The Bahamas, each worthy of respect and recognition for its contribution to our national development.

From the Loyalist and descendants of colonial officials, the merchant elite prospered in Prohibition and the redistributive trades and ruled the colony of The Bahamas until 1967 when we achieved majority rule.

The Greek Bahamians, pioneers in the sponging industry and later, with the Chinese, also became significant merchants and later professionals. Black Bahamian professionals such as teachers, undertakers, merchants, entrepreneurs in the cultural

industry also contributed to the economic history of The Bahamas and provided avenues for economic and social mobility.

Mr. Speaker, it was out of the belly of the African communities that the craft of straw weaving was preserved. This traditional craft is present on all of our Family Islands, each exhibiting a unique plaiting or braiding style. During the period of subsistence farming and fishing, the straw baskets were used for carrying fruit and fishing traps. Today the craft works, from straw work, wood carvings, shell work, are produced as functional souvenirs for visitors and residents.

Mr. Speaker, we should not forget that near Vendue House, at George and Bay Street, where newly arrived enslaved Africans had been processed and sold, the descendants of those same enslaved Africans from Fox Hill and later from Ova Da Hill communities, almost two hundred years later, brought their palmetto straw and sisal fibre plaited crafts from the 1920s to Rawson Square and Prince George Dock to sell to tourists.

Mr. Speaker, these artisans, primarily enterprising Black women, produced another stream of entrepreneurship and mobility into the Bahamian middle class. Pioneers, such as Albertha Brown, Senator Telator Strachan, educated their children and grandchildren from the Straw Market, many of whom became professionals, business leaders (Franklyn Wilson, Ishmael Lightbourne), politicians (such as Cynthia Pratt, Melanie Griffin, Tommy Turnquest, Zhivargo Laing), preachers and diplomats. As the Straw Market became a major cultural attraction on Bay Street, craft businesspersons in the Straw Market grew in influence and began to rival the monopoly of the Bay Street Merchants in competing for the tourist dollar on Bay Street.

Mr. Speaker, it was in the Straw Market that the paintings of Amos Ferguson, the famous intuitive artist, were exhibited and sold to tourists by his wife, Beatrice Ferguson, until 1978 when Sukie Miller, an American collector saw his paintings and arranged an exhibition of his paintings in the United States. With the support of the young Minister of Tourism Perry Christie and after the exhibition of Mr. Ferguson's works at the Wadsworth Atheneum the rest is history in terms of international recognition and local respect for Mr. Amos Ferguson.

Mr. Speaker, for generations, many of our tourists, exposed to the Las Vegas environment of our large resorts and the absence of local entertainment establishments as was the case in the 1950s through 1970s, often the only cultural products that they can buy and take with them as a souvenir of their Bahamian experience is the indigenous craft bough in the Straw Market.

It is here, Mr. Speaker, that generations of Straw Market businesspersons have showcased and sold the craft made by themselves and other Bahamian artisans from our Family Islands. Millions of persons in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa have coasters, carvings, placemats, paintings, bags, aprons, hats and other amenities depicting the Bahamian creative imagination. The preservation of this industry is important for its represents an important area of entrepreneurial opportunity as well as an outlet for Bahamian cultural expression.

This debate is important because the Straw Market represents an important area of capital accumulation for Bahamians, an avenue for economic mobility and an avenue for the expression of Bahamian cultural identity.

The Straw Market Authority Bill claims that its purpose is “**to establish a body corporate to own, maintain and manage the Straw Market or any other government owned craft or straw market.**” Having toured the new Straw Market last Friday, my impression is that the facility is too small to accommodate the existing 500 plus Straw Vendors whereas the facility is designed for about 440 Craft Vendors; the stalls are too small for adequate display of the craft wares; the pathways are too narrow to facilitate the normal traffic of tourists; and the limited storage for inventory will force Vendors to take their inventory home daily for overnight storage.

Mr. Speaker, while I commend the artistic work of the architect, Mr. Patrick Rahming and the Government in completing this project, the construction of the 37,000 square feet facility will accommodate only 440 Straw Vendors of the 500 plus Straw Vendors; it is 20% of the size of what the Christies Administration’s proposed four storey structure with three atrium levels dedicated to Straw Vendors and a roof fourth top level dedicated to other income generating amenities projected at \$1.7 per annum and the stalls are 12 square feet instead of 48 square feet. The question we must ask is whether this facility is too small for the current population and future growth of Straw Vendors in the Market?

However, based on a review of the Bill and Regulations there are also a number of questions that must be answered in order to ensure fairness and transparency of the proposed authority:-

1. The composition of the Authority is not defined in terms of the number of Directors. Will the Directors include representatives of the major stakeholder, Straw Vendors?

How do we know that the Directors will not be drawn from the Bay Street merchants, who are the competitors of the Straw Vendors?

2. In the Schedule, the composition, number of Directors and criteria for the selection of the Directors are left to the “exclusive discretion” of the Minister, unlike the Bahamas National Trust Act, the Education Guarantee Fund Act, the Education Loan Authority and the Engineers Act where a specific number of Directors are stated and the functional areas from which they should be drawn. The Straw Market Bill is unusual in that the number of Directors is not specified nor the functional areas from which they should be drawn. The Straw Vendors themselves will have no guaranteed representation on the Board of the Authority. Will the makers of indigenous craft in the Family Islands have any representation on the Board?
3. No due process provision are contained in Rule 9 of the Regulation dealing with the suspension and revocation of a Vendor’s Licence, such as proper notice, letter to show cause, opportunity to be heard either in person or in writing and an appeal process.
4. Regulation 14 entitled “Dress Code” at (1) (c) states that “**A vendor and his market helper, while in the Market, shall**

use proper hygiene products to avoid high offensive body odor; (d) avoid the use of highly-scented perfumes or colognes.” This language is the first that I have seen in my 10 years in Parliament and suggest, I believe a class prejudice against the businesspersons in the Straw Market.

5. No provision is made to grandmother/father those persons who have been in the Straw Market industry for decades.
6. What criteria will be used to determine who will be awarded the specialty stores in the Straw Market?

CONCLUSION

Mr. Speaker, the absence of clear legislative direction on the composition of the board of the Authority, mandating representation of the major stakeholders, the Straw Vendors themselves, and the absence of due process provisions to ensure that the suspension and revocation of a Vendor's Licence is fair leaves, I contend, the entire operation of the Straw Market in this new facility open to political victimization and favoritism under the guise of “ministerial discretion”.

These omissions by this Parliament, in this singular instance compared to similar legislation regulating other groups, amounts to practicing “apartheid” with a group of Bahamian entrepreneurs whose contribution, in promoting Bahamian culture, heritage and touristic product, is not accorded the same respect as other entrepreneurs whose contribution to the economy and society is recognized with generous concessions, respect and even national honours.