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Fraud Plagues Bahamas Real Estate Industry

Fraudulent real estate deals and questionable land sales causing confusion, lawsuits among the claimants and distress within the community.

I am writing to the Bahamian people to express my deep concern about the confusion, and legal complexity of land ownership in the Bahamas.

I am an American citizen, but my family has a house on Rum Cay for 35 years, and I consider this beautiful place home. My husband, Oscar Davis, and I were married in St John's Episcopal Church in Rum Cay in 1993, and we live here six months of each year.

Rum Cay has been known as the Jewel of the Bahamas for many years because of its incredible beauty, and because of the tranquil way of life for the fewer than 100 people who live here. Remote, difficult to get to, and with no amenities such as roads, water, electricity; and regular air service, this island remained untouched by newcomers for generations.

For many years the small population petitioned the Government for roads, street lights, and an airport, wanting to be connected with the rest of The Bahamas, and the world. Finally, electricity came in 1996. The three million dollar airport, and black-topped roads followed in 2001. Due to these additions, the island is now experiencing rapid changes, mainly due to the influx of money(ed) foreign investors, and sun-seekers looking for a piece of paradise.

Many locals are concerned about the possibly fraudulent sale of large tracts of land, here on Rum Cay, reputed to have been either inherited or bought from the Effie Knowles estate. As your readers may already know, this deceased lady has already caused a lot of chaos on five major Bahamian islands. She was a lawyer who left a legacy of many recorded conveyances of land, that are now being surveyed, and chopped into lots. Many of these tracts are being fought over, and the ensuing lawsuits among the claimants have caused confusion and distress within the community.

Perhaps there should be a stop put to the sale of these lands, until the government and the claimants can sort out fact from fiction? Does it seem likely that Effie Knowles could have bought large stretches of pristine beach-front on Rum Cay in the 1960's? If she truly owned lots within the settlement of Port Nelson; why aren't any of the Bahamian families who live here now familiar with her name? Could she have also managed to buy what appears to be Crown Land, that had always been set aside for a possible lighthouse?

The validity of her claims have been questioned and investigated on other major islands in the Bahamas, and in some cases, no root of title has been established. If this proves to be the case on Rum Cay, who will reimburse the newest owners, when they find out that they have bought an illegal piece of property?

How do the Bahamians who have lived an isolated, uncomplicated life for generations stand up and say no to the often ruthless land speculators who are driven mainly by short-term profits? Many investors see these beautiful Bahamas as a means to make a quick fortune, and they will leave with their profits, not particularly concerned with the once tranquil communities welfare or future.

Maybe it is, time to slow down, and really consider the long-term effects of questionable land

sales. Perhaps we need to stop unauthorised bulldozing of new roads which result in the destruction of historically priceless boundary walls, and other private property; until we can establish rightful ownership.

We need time, and professional help to understand and deal with the complicated nature of the changes that face us here on Rum Cay, and on all the other islands that are being economically, culturally, and spiritually affected by the rapid turn-over of land ownership in the Bahamas.

Letter to the Editor By SUSAN DAVIS, Rum Cay
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