



BELIZE – October 2020

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GOB PASSES ANOTHER LAND TAX BREAK “FOR THE BIG MAN” 1

GOB passes another land tax break “for the big man”

At the last sitting of the House of Representatives held on Friday, September 25, 2020, a bill to remit land taxes during the COVID-19 pandemic was introduced by the Minister of Natural Resources, Hugo Patt.

Hon. Patt said that the bill was formulated for those in the productive sector, and its primary purpose is to provide some relief for farmers who have been economically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that the relief in land taxes would allow those in the productive sector to reinvest in their farms.

In his presentation, Patt said that 75 percent of private landowners in Belize are considered small; the remaining 25 percent are owners of large plots of private land. Many of these lands are left unoccupied for years, with no maintenance being done or any form of tax being paid on them.

According to Patt, the land amnesty program of 2019 was established to draw out these delinquent landowners by offering them a discount on their property tax. That program, which was to the benefit of a select few, has now been followed by this new bill for a land tax break, which will mainly benefit the owners of large landholdings in rural areas.

Hon. Cordel Hyde, area representative for Lake Independence (Lake I), said that he would have wanted to see meaningful relief given to a greater number of people as opposed to just a selected few.

In his presentation, Hyde spoke of an ongoing, silent housing crisis taking place in Belize; he pointed out that relief is needed for persons who have been almost completely dispossessed, since they have been evicted from their rented homes.

“What I would have really wanted to see was some relief provided to all these ordinary people who are being kicked out of their homes by heartless landlords because they can’t pay,” Hyde remarked.

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Hyde also called out the Prime Minister on his assertion of an accelerated disbursement of COVID-19 relief funds, saying that only a fraction of the applications have been approved, with more than half of those applications still unprocessed.

Hyde said, “I feel like Government can be rather efficient writing off land taxes for the big people; they can be rather efficient when they want to set up the National Gas Company, but can be rather inefficient when it comes to ensuring that the little people get weh dey fi get.”

The Land Tax Amendment Bill has since gone to the Senate, where members of the Upper House debated the legislation to some extent on September 30.

Senator Mark Lizarraga, who represents the business community, said that he disagreed with the idea of forgiving landowners who have been delinquent in the payment of their land tax.

Senator Michael Peyrefitte, who is also the Attorney General, said that the bill does not give the Minister of Natural Resources wide-reaching powers, and does not allow him to haphazardly write off land taxes, but in fact, puts him in a box.

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