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To: Members of the First and Second Chamber

Subject: Urgent law change to the WOLBES

Date: October 6th, 2025

Dear Honorable Members of the First and Second Chamber,

Recently, urgent changes to the WOLBES regarding the number of Island Council Members and Commissioners for Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba have been announced. The proposed law change has long been discussed within certain circles in The Hague, including at last year's WOLBES/FINBES conference in the Netherlands with the islands and BZK.

Since then, the Netherlands has experienced elections, a new Cabinet, a collapsed coalition, and now a caretaker Cabinet, with new elections scheduled for October 29th. As a result, progress on amending the WOLBES or FINBES has been minimal, and indications since the fall of the original coalition suggested implementation would be delayed until 2031. Yet, without consultation with the islands, this specific law change is now being rushed to take effect before the 2027 Island Council elections. This occurs even as time to prepare for such drastic changes is shrinking. The islands lack the financial resources to adapt, and neither their physical infrastructure nor institutional capacity will be ready to manage these challenges effectively.

My views on these proposed changes, and on The Hague's unilateral decision regarding the Rijksvertegenwoordiger which were contrary to previous agreements, are already known and need not be reiterated here. This law is a priority for The Hague and will proceed regardless of readiness. History will judge whether it strengthens democracy or destabilizes the Public Entities. My concern, however, lies elsewhere. Are these changes truly a priority for the islands themselves? Given the choice, would other legislative adjustments not take precedence?

Since 2007, I have served as Commissioner for Saba. The growth Saba has experienced since the transition would have been impossible under the previous structure. The benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. For the most part, most things function well, whether acknowledged or not.

However, the sudden urgency around this law compels me to point out some inconsistencies. For 15 years, ministries and politicians have often hidden behind laws as immovable obstacles, even when those laws no longer reflect our island realities. As a result, practical adjustments that could significantly improve daily life are frequently ignored, leaving our people to face the same challenges year after year. Allow me to highlight just a few examples.

Work Permits

Before the transition, the local government processed work permits. Since then, schools for example, have struggled to start the academic year with full staffing because of delays with IND processes. Often, teachers back out because the processes take too long, leaving entire classes without a physical or qualified teacher. This is not a new problem, as it has been raised repeatedly. This example also applies for businesses. Yet this law remains unchanged. The negative impact on our children, schools and business community is profound.

Intervention in struggling schools

When schools struggle, the Ministry of OCW cannot act immediately due to a law requiring an Education Inspectorate report before intervention. In the European Netherlands this probably makes sense. But parents there have choices and can choose another school, even if it means a longer commute. But on our small islands, especially Saba, with only one primary and one high school, this is impossible. Simply put, there are no other choices. Despite years of acknowledging that this law fails in our context, no change has been made to allow OCW to intervene directly when quality concerns arise.

Connectivity and economic growth

For years, Saba and St. Eustatius have been urged to diversify their economies, yet connectivity remains the key barrier. A PSO (Public Service Obligation) is the only way to regulate frequency and fares. Because flights to St. Maarten are classified as “international,” current law prohibits subsidies or regulation, treating it as travel between two countries. After 15 years of discussion, some ministries still resist the creation of a law needed for a PSO, while the draft law slowly makes its way through Parliament. Meanwhile, our people face what is likely the world’s most expensive twelve minute flight, with ticket prices reaching as high as \$415. And even if legislation eventually passes, there are already signals that no immediate funding will follow. The contradiction is well known, yet the problem persists.

Healthcare access

For over a decade, a visiting orthodontist from St. Maarten cared for Saba’s children, until his services ended because he is not BIG registered. Families must now either pay out of pocket to travel monthly to St. Maarten (up to \$415 per ticket) or abandon treatment altogether. This was a vital service for Saba. The irony is that ZICN (the health insurance provider) routinely sends patients abroad to non-BIG certified doctors. In the European Netherlands, such rigid law enforcement has little impact. If one orthodontist office is unavailable, there are many others nearby. For us, it means the service disappears entirely.

Cost of living and bureaucracy

The high cost of living receives national attention, and recent steps, such as raising the minimum wage and introducing a social minimum, aim to improve residents’ quality of life. Yet not enough has been done to reduce actual expenses. When salaries rise, consumers ultimately pay. Our tax structure even promotes double taxation, with a 4% service tax levied on the value of goods that are already taxed at 6%. On top of this, the Asycuda import declaration system, with nearly 100 codes, forces businesses to hire extra staff and individual importers to use brokers. Costs again that are passed on to the consumer. Most ironic of all, despite its complexity, the islands cannot access usable data for statistics or informed decision making. These are not minor inconveniences, but layers of bureaucracy created by unworkable laws that burden our people daily.

Overregulation and Island Differentiation

Differentiating between Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba continues to be a challenge for The Hague. Although each island has a unique relationship with the Netherlands, we are often treated as one BES island. This works in some cases but fails in others. A wastewater issue on one island doesn't justify the same on the others. Environmental or permitting concerns for one island shouldn't lead to overregulation for all. The result is countless costly, often unnecessary studies that largely confirm what the islands have reported for years. When results don't align with The Hague's expectations, more studies follow, perpetuating a cycle of overregulation for nonpractical reasons. This happens while genuine island priorities, such as structural funding for the physical infrastructure, do not materialize.

Conclusion

These examples go beyond minor inconveniences. Even with substantial investments and ongoing improvements, many of the laws and systems that affect daily life remain deeply flawed. These shortcomings are long recognized, even by The Hague, yet they persist. For 15 years, the islands have raised the same concerns, but without political urgency from The Hague, little changes. Meanwhile, the proposed WOLBES amendment, which is not a pressing priority for the islands, is suddenly treated with urgency and set to be rushed through by 2027, despite its substantial financial and practical consequences.

As local politicians, we face our people daily. We must explain why there is no teacher, why orthodontic care has stopped, or why groceries remain so costly, even though these issues originate from laws and systems beyond our authority. The contrast is stark: when The Hague prioritizes a law, change can happen quickly.

This letter is not aimed at any one individual, ministry, or political party. Rather, it reflects broad based sentiments, grounded in 15 years of experience, that highlight a lack of urgency in addressing laws which directly affect the liveability, growth, and success of our people and communities. We sincerely hope that under the leadership of the new State Secretary, and with the support of the First and Second Chamber, the islands' priorities will receive the same urgency and focus, as this quick change of law. This moment offers an opportunity not only to correct past inconsistencies but also to demonstrate that the relationship with the islands is built on genuine partnership and mutual respect. By aligning legislative priorities with the real needs of our communities, we can ensure that laws and systems truly work for the people, not against them.

Respectfully,


Bruce Zagers
Commissioner of Saba



Cc: The Ministry of BZK, Island Council of Saba