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New Transportation Hub Opens in St. Thomas Under Dowe's Dynamic Leadership

Governor Bryan and Senate President Novelle Francis laud Executive Director Carlton Dowe's leadership at the ribbon-cutting ceremony

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Local officials, Dale Gregory and his family, celebrate the opening of the parking lot facility in St. Thomas on April 16, 2024. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The latest project by the V.I. Port Authority to upgrade the travel experience in the territory, the Dale A. Gregory Transportation Center, was given the ribbon-cutting treatment on Tuesday, and will officially open to the public on Monday, April 22.

Tuesday's celebration, as deemed by VIPA communications head Monifa Brathwaite, represented the completion of the first phase of the parking lot. When fully completed, it will offer 311 public

parking spaces along with nine accessible parking spaces. During the ceremony, periodic construction noise from the second phase of the project, slated for completion in May, disturbed the event.

Parking is free for the first 15 minutes, with costs after that ranging from \$4 for an hour to \$20 for the day.

The new parking lot — built with a \$20 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce-Economic Development Administration in 2019, and a \$6.8 million local match — represents yet another monumental project in the U.S. Virgin Islands by the V.I. Port Authority that was started and completed under the leadership of Executive Director Carlton Dowe. "If you want something done, give it to Dowe. Dowe now!" Senate President Novelle Francis proclaimed at the ceremony, as did Governor Albert Bryan when he said, "I would follow that dude anywhere because he ain't afraid, meson. We gon' take them down. It could be two to a thousand, I deh with Dowe."

"We've literally watched the Dale A. Gregory Transportation Center take shape from the ground up, and it's not everyday you're able to break ground and cut ribbon in a reasonable amount of time," Sen. Francis added.

VIPA Deputy Executive Director Anise Hodge, who continues to be intimately involved in the project, pointed to major infrastructural upgrades over the decades including the Austin Babe Monsanto Marine Terminal, the expansion of the runways on both of the territory's airports, and the construction of the Lindbergh Bay water park, among others. She acknowledged the tremendous efforts of the team of VIPA employees in getting the parking lot grant approved and the project completed, as well as the efforts of the other government offices, agencies and consultants who contributed their efforts.

Next, the man after whom the new facility has been named spoke of the honor that has capped his 37-year career at VIPA. "This moment is a culmination of a lifelong dedication to advancing our infrastructure and serving our community," Dale Gregory said. The long-serving engineer, referencing the works outlined by Ms. Hodge before him, said that he was "particularly proud" of his work on some of VIPA's major capital projects, infrastructure that has "reshaped the way we approach transportation in the USVI." Although the new transportation center bears his name, Mr. Gregory insisted that "this honor is not just mine. It belongs to every person who has been a part of this incredible journey."

VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe spent much of his time at the podium expressing gratitude to the myriad of people who assisted in the successful completion of the parking center. Notwithstanding his own pivotal role, the VIPA head was at pains to enumerate the crucial contributions the people surrounding him have made in ensuring that the transportation center came to fruition. "I'm sorry, but I have to take the time because it's not often the public gets to understand and see who makes some of these things happen," he said, naming Chief of Staff Julice Holder, Chief Financial Officer Ava Penn, Ms. Hodge, and Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, who served as VIPA's CFO before taking up her legislative position.

Mr. Dowe noted that these women, and others in VIPA's senior leadership team, counseled on the implementation of an unpopular passenger surcharge that helped to fund the transportation center. "Leadership dictates you do things sometimes not popular, and so we are here today," he underscored. Mr. Dowe also paid tribute to Mr. Gregory, thanking him for his dedication and commitment to VIPA and to the territory.

The VIPA CEO continued to call on people throughout his remarks, holding up contractor Ricardo Gonzales of AT Construction Solutions, subcontractor Eric Castro, and engineers Damien Cartwright and Tafari Nelson for public approbation. He spoke almost exclusively about how much of a collective effort the transportation center project was, noting the collaboration of the Legislature and the Office of the Governor and its associated arms. “I really wanted to thank each and every one of you up here, in particular the governing body,” Mr. Dowe said, “because I could have all the ideas I want [but] if I don’t have enough people to support the idea and bring people around, that idea is for nought.”

Tourism Commissioner Joseph Boschulte, underscoring the beneficial effect the new center will have on the tourism product of St. Thomas and the territory as a whole, stated, “Any time we have a capital project that makes the needs of our residents and guests alike earlier by easing pickups, movement, ground transportation – it is a plus.”

For his part, Governor Bryan recognized the long service of Mr. Gregory to the community, and commended the VIPA team for their hard work in making the transportation center a reality. “Change is hard and progress is even more difficult,” he acknowledged. He used the occasion of the facility’s official opening as a marker of the territory’s challenging recovery from the devastation of years past. “As we progress through this transformation of our incredible Virgin Islands, I want you to remember that the tunnel might be dark, but there’s light at the end,” he reminded those in attendance.