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Op-Ed: VIPA Leads USVI into Economic Future with Airport Transformation Projects

Groundbreaking partnership aims to enhance Cyril E. King and Henry E. Rohlsen Airports, boosting tourism and local economy.

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V.I. PORT AUTHORITY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARLTON DOWE By. VIPA

On March 26th, the Virgin Islands Port Authority Board of Governors took a transformational step in the direction of prosperity when they selected VIports Partners, as the preferred proposer of the public-private partnership (P3) to spearhead the modernization of the Cyril E. King and Henry E. Rohlsen Airports in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

VIports Partners is a consortium of several international companies with extensive experience in the redevelopment and management of airports and construction. The major consortium partners

are Aecon Group, Inc., Tikehau Star Infra, AVPorts, LLC, Corgan Associates, Inc., Consigli Construction, and a local contracting company, J. Benton Construction.

This bold and forward-thinking decision has VIports Partners assuming the financial and operational mantle for the redevelopment of the airport's terminals, as well as the operations, and maintenance of these crucial facilities. The culmination of this selection process signifies a watershed moment in the territory's pursuit of new and improved airports in St. Thomas and St. Croix. The selection of VIports Partners concluded 18 months of the P3 procurement process, which saw the submission of two strong proposals in February of this year in response to the VIPAs P3 Request for Proposals. Following a meticulous evaluation process by the Authority's Evaluation Committee, the VIPA Board endorsed my recommendation of VIports Partners. April 20, 2024.

The twin airport projects could not come at a more critical time in Virgin Islands history. Our residents deserve airports that are safe and attractive with modern amenities. As a premier tourist destination, our guests deserve the same. These new facilities will stimulate economic growth in the Territory while providing all travelers with a safe, comfortable, and pleasant experience. The Caribbean's tourist industry is highly competitive. We must invest and plan to maintain our status as a premier destination.

With this development, our airports are poised to embrace terminal designs characterized by sustainability, resilience, innovation, and efficiency, catering to the needs of both our residents and the ever-increasing influx of tourists. These enhancements will introduce additional passenger amenities, retail opportunities, enhanced customer service, reduced wait times, and the critically needed passenger jet bridges, all while integrating the cultural essence of the U.S. Virgin Islands into the process, design, and aesthetics of the final product.

Beyond enhancing the passenger experience, these transformations are anticipated to stimulate increased cargo activity, open new airline routes, boost non-aeronautical revenue at both airports and consequently drive economic growth through job creation and commercial opportunities across the territory. Environmentally, the airport redevelopment will adhere to minimum and in some instances exceed LEED Silver standards and building code requirements for resiliency.

VIports' commitment to the U.S. Virgin Islands extends to its commitment to retaining VIPA airport employees and engaging all stakeholders in constructive dialogues to ensure that April 20, 2024 the economic benefits are harnessed while preserving the cultural heritage of our people and land. The redevelopment timeline for this complex project is estimated to span approximately four years with the commencement of construction expected by mid2025. VIPA will continue to be transparent and keep the public aware of all major developments and transactions that we are making throughout the transition process.

I thank the 34th and 35th VI Legislatures for their participation, and the Bryan/Roach Administration for their unwavering support for the project. I also thank the public for their attendance and feedback during the four town hall meetings we hosted throughout the territory.

This is a grand and ambitious endeavor befitting a premier destination. More profoundly, this project represents the collective aspirations of the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands. As we all embark on this transformative journey, let us not shy away from dreaming boldly and committing ourselves wholeheartedly to executing this bold vision with unparalleled dedication and innovation. We deserve no less. We see the steady pace of investment amongst our Caribbean competitors. We must innovate and change to maintain and grow the industry that accounts for

more than 70% of our gross territorial product. I will say here what I have said many times – the Caribbean and the rest of the world are not going to wait for us!

Carlton Dowe is the Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Port Authority.

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