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“Let’s Hope We’re Not Talking 30 Years”: Army Corps Of Engineers Say Gallows Bay Dredging “Not An Overnight Process”

From initial studies to political approval: Gallows Bay dredging and transformation to port facilitating small, luxury cruise ships could take decades, USACE warns.

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The Gallows Bay Marine Facility on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Residents of St. Croix learned on Tuesday that the project to upgrade Gallows Bay to [accommodate small cruise ships and luxury yachts](#) will take years to accomplish, starting with a feasibility study which is currently in its initial stages.

At the meeting convened by the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the V.I. Port Authority, planning technical lead Katie Bailey outlined the role of the USACE in this project – “to provide safe, reliable, efficient, effective and environmentally sustainable waterborne transportation systems stemming from the Commerce Clause of the United States Constitution.”

Last October, a feasibility cost share agreement was signed between VIPA and the USACE that marked the beginning of a study that would last at least three years. “Sometimes they’re longer,” Ms. Bailey noted. That study would “identify water resource problems, and use that to formulate and evaluate solutions to those problems,” Ms. Bailey explained. Once that has been completed, federal authorities would then decide on whether to move forward with construction, culminating in the passage of legislation in Congress to authorize the project.

Studies of this nature have been conducted on Gallows Bay since the 1950s. The initial study proposed a “25-foot deep channel on the east side of Round Reef which is essentially where the central channel is today,” Ms. Bailey noted. “It was never constructed...later in the 50s we re-studied it and found that there was not economic justification for that specific design orientation of the project.”

A decade later, another study. This one “moved the channel to the west of Round Reef...and it also lessens the depth to 16 feet,” Ms. Bailey said. In 1962, another report was issued, “that kind of tweaked the design to give us the channel that we know today with those 290 degree turns and it follows the natural channel.” In 1986, the original plan from the 1950s was “officially de-authorized,” explained Ms. Bailey, meaning that no dredging work can be done on the schooner channel “without another project getting authorized.” She noted that solo efforts by VIPA to dredge the channel in 1991 and 2014 were either not completed or not begun at all.

This new study, officials underscored, would not only look at the dredging or widening of the channel but also other non-structural management measures, “maybe adding some traffic management, maybe doing additional tugs, things like that,” Ms. Bailey said.

One of the big concerns emanating from the discussion was that of timeline. “This is not an overnight process” warned Chris McNees, project manager for the Jacksonville, Florida-based USACE. “There’s no exact time to this. It’s real high risk. I’d hate to tell you that we’re going to build you a project in five to 10 years, but it’ll be at least that time or more, because again, we have no less than three or four years right now in the current feasibility phase that we’re in.”

After the feasibility phase, Mr. McNees admitted that timelines were largely dependent on the political process playing itself out. “The Corps does not lobby on behalf of the community or the non-federal sponsor,” he reminded. “Our job is to evaluate design, and then execute upon receipt of the appropriations to do so.”

One meeting attendee speculated that it could take 30 years to see the project to completion. “Let’s hope we’re not talking 30 years,” responded Mr. McNees, “but I’m not going to stand up here and tell you it’s gonna be built in five.”

At the end of the day, USACE’s role in the project is well-defined. “Our job is to evaluate the problem that’s been presented by the V.I. Port Authority, and to see how we can – in the best interest of the nation as well as the best interest of the Virgin Islands – have more benefits than we do have costs as it relates to what we may or may not have to impact or work around in order to have a successful project,” declared Mr. McNees.

USACE promised that public consultations and participation would be a crucial element in the success of the project, and officials encouraged attendees to keep track of the project’s progress

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