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WICO Reports Substantial Cruise Industry Recovery Post-Pandemic

With a 20% increase in cruise ship visits and nearly 729,000 passengers this season, WICO's CEO outlines an optimistic future and discusses extensive development plans

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The West Indian Company Dock. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

A strong post-pandemic rebound in the cruise sector is providing executives of the West Indian Company Limited with an optimistic outlook for the near future according to WICO Chief Executive Officer Anthony Ottley, as he presented the board of the Public Finance Authority with detailed updates on the company's ongoing projects and strategic plans.?

During Thursday's PFA meeting, board members learned that WICO has experienced a 20% rise in cruise ship calls from October 1 2023 to April 30 2024 when compared to the same period from the previous year. "WICO has welcomed 217 cruise ship calls, bringing nearly 729,000 passengers to our shores," Mr. Ottley stated. There should be an additional 17 port calls by the end of the fiscal year, bringing more than 240,000 additional passengers to the territory.

For fiscal year 2025, WICO anticipates receiving 289 ship calls with an estimated 1.1 million passengers. "These numbers signify a definitive bounce back from the COVID era and a steady return to pre-pandemic passenger volumes," Mr. Ottley remarked.

Meanwhile, WICO continues to explore development opportunities for the Liverpool property, a seven-acre site envisioned for various potential uses, including resorts, water parks, and marinas. Mr. Ottley mentioned that during the Seatrade conference this year, discussions were held with engineers and planners to refine the development plan. "The ultimate goal is to develop a financially feasible and implementable plan that enhances the cruise passenger experience and generates additional revenue for WICO," he explained.

The WICO CEO also detailed ongoing construction and maintenance projects aimed at improving the company's facilities. Key initiatives include repairs to WICO's administration building and ancillary structures, which face accelerated wear and tear due to their proximity to the ocean. "These repairs encompass painting, welding, and replacing air conditioners, metal doors, and windows," Mr. Ottley noted.

He told the PFA that the dredging project for the Charlotte Amalie harbor is progressing, with permits expected soon. "Geotechnical studies and coral relocation will commence once the permit is received, with construction slated to begin by the end of 2024," Mr. Ottley informed the board.

WICO is also working to address recurring water pipe ruptures at its facility by upgrading subsurface infrastructure. The original cast iron pipes which were installed "back in the mid-1900s" according to Mr. Ottley have since corroded badly, resulting in significant water losses. A planned upgrade is scheduled for completion in January 2025. "This upgrade is essential to reduce costly water leakages and ensure reliable water supply for the facility," Mr. Ottley asserted.

Additionally, WICO has installed new turnstiles as part of the Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) upgrade. The company is applying for a grant to enhance its camera system with facial recognition capabilities if necessary. "These upgrades are vital for maintaining security and operational efficiency at our facilities," Mr. Ottley said.

The WICO CEO also provided PFA board members with a snapshot of the company's financial health, highlighting a stable cash position and positive revenue trends. As of December 2023, WICO had \$575,000 in cash and \$7.1 million in restricted cash. Operating revenues for fiscal year 2023 were \$2.4 million, with operating expenses amounting to \$2.3 million. "We are in a solid financial position, and our agreements with major cruise lines like Carnival, Norwegian, and Disney account for approximately 95% of our passenger volume," Mr. Ottley said, offering to provide a more detailed account in the PFA's closed-door executive session.

He ended his presentation with a positive outlook for WICO's future, emphasizing ongoing efforts to enhance the cruise passenger experience and strengthen the company's financial stability.