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USVI Hotel & Tourism Association Endorses Major Upgrades for St. Thomas and St. Croix Airports

In an Op-Ed, USVIHTA supports the redevelopment of Cyril E. King and Henry E. Rohlsen Airports through a public-private partnership with VIPorts Partners, emphasizing need for modern facilities to enhance the travel experience

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Illuminated Dubai International Airport at dusk, UAE. By. GETTY IMAGES

The USVI Hotel & Tourism Association (USVIHTA) fully supports the plans for essential and long-needed improvements to the airport experience on St. Thomas and St. Croix. The Cyril E. King Airport (CEKA) was built to process 600,000 arriving and departing passengers a year. In 2022, more than 1.65 million passengers used the terminal. Although the numbers were down in

2023, arrivals of 285,150 passengers through April 2024 are 26.2% higher year over year.

The terminals have not been upgraded since 1989 (CEKA) and 2000 (Henry E. Rohlsen Airport or HERA) except for the CEKA baggage claim area, renovated in 2014, and the HERA domestic lounge, remodeled in 2021. As the gateway to the islands for tourists, the airports provide the first and last impression for our visitors. As the territory continues to see an increase in tourist arrivals, there is a critical need to reimagine and improve the airport experience.

Visitors come to the U.S. Virgin Islands to enjoy a vacation. The arrival experience at CEKA is extremely challenging. Several planes landing within the same time frame cause long waits for luggage, congestion and confusion for travelers. The long departure lines at Customs and TSA, sometimes snaking outside the terminal, cause enormous frustration. Current procedures for boarding and deplaning need updating to streamline the process and ensure the safety and convenience of travelers and airport employees. Boarding passengers via stairs in the rain and heat simply does not satisfy those criteria. By modernizing the facilities at CEKA and HERA, both airports will finally compete with other Caribbean airports.

USVIHTA firmly believes in this private/public partnership (P3). During the bidding process, the only company that reached out to USVIHTA was AECON, part of the VIports Partners consortium that will partner with the Virgin Islands Port Authority (VIPA). AECON acknowledged the importance of gathering input from the tourism sector and the community regarding the challenges and requirements for a new airport. AVPORTS, the operating partner of VIports, has experience operating airports in the U.S. and Caribbean in a safe and efficient manner with a focus on the customer experience. Each member of the VIports Partners consortium has demonstrated expertise that will benefit this plan.

VIports Partners has committed to developing, financing and operating both CEKA and HERA in accordance with best practices at U.S. and Caribbean airports. The terminal redevelopment will include modern airport amenities including passenger boarding bridges at both airports. Local businesses and stakeholders will have a crucial role in the plan by participating in an advisory team to assist with the procurement process and provide input to the design-build team. They will also participate in the airport concessions. The planned project increases employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for our community.

Although VIPA is entering into a P3 agreement, the airports will not be privatized; they will remain under the ownership of VIPA. Importantly, VIPA will have oversight over the airports' private partner. VIports Partners will provide funding to modernize and improve the airports in exchange for a long-term lease of the terminals with operating and management agreements. This private investment means that both airports receive needed infrastructure upgrades without placing a capital debt burden on VIPA or the Government of the Virgin Islands.

The P3 agreement ensures that the USVI gets a best-in-class airport developer and operator while remaining in compliance with FAA regulations and safety requirements. VIPA is working with VIports Partners to ensure a smooth transition for VIPA employees. There will also be procedures in place for VIPA to conduct reviews and inspections, and hold VIports Partners accountable to the terms of the agreement

USVIHTA commends VIPA for deciding to enter into this P3. We look forward to the long-awaited, necessary enhancement of the travel experience for visitors and residents alike.

Submitted by: *USVI Hotel & Tourism Association on Wednesday, July 31, 2024.*

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