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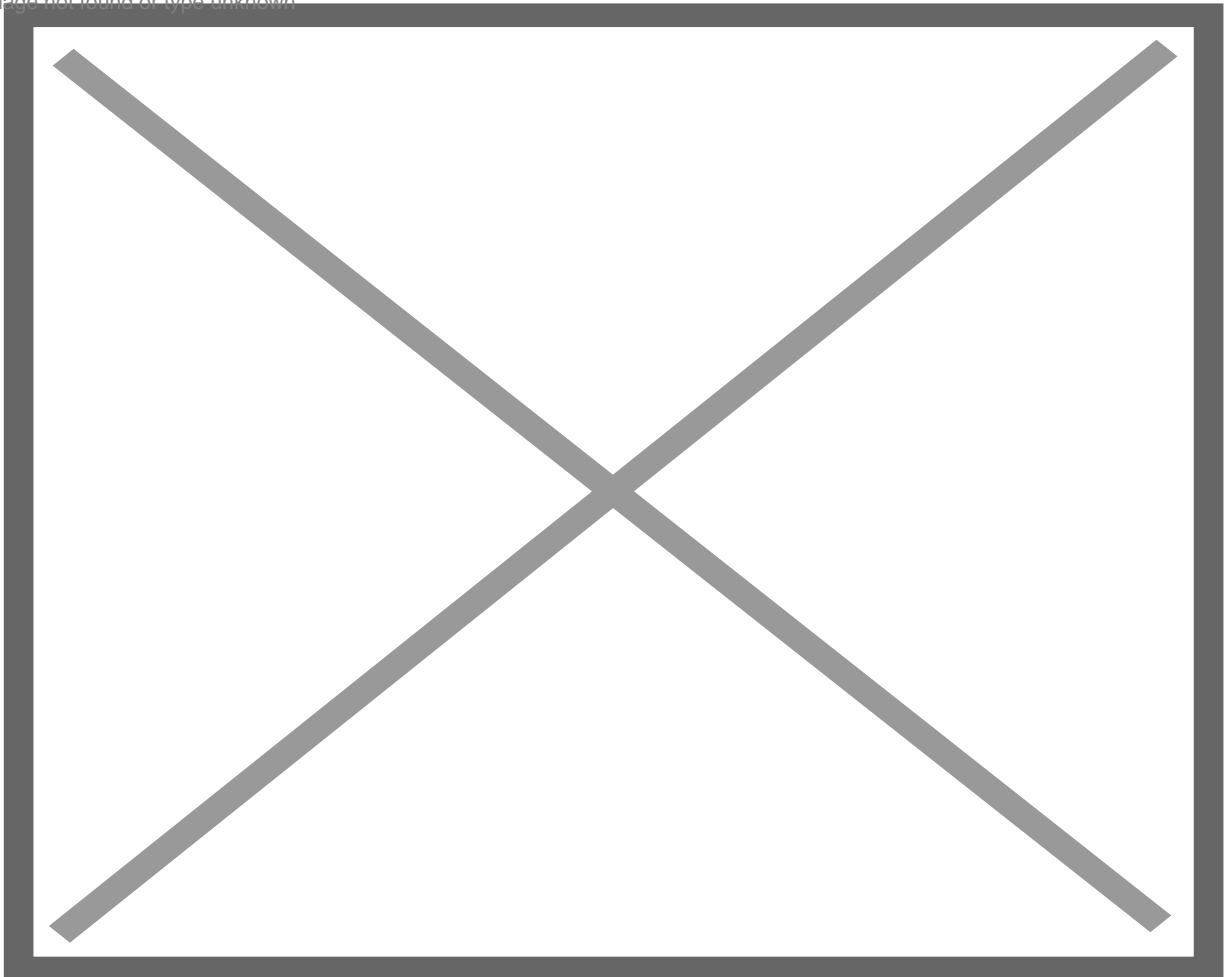
Struggling Businesses in Christiansted Hope for Holiday Boost Despite Roadwork Setbacks, Decline in Foot Traffic

As holiday season approaches, Christiansted merchants are facing disruptions from ongoing road repairs and reduced customer flow, voicing the need for swift action to help restore town vibrancy

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Collage of pothole-ridden and uneven roads in downtown Christiansted, highlighting infrastructure issues affecting local businesses. By. JANEKA SIMON, V.I. CONSORTIUM

DOWNTOWN CHRISTIANSTED, ST. CROIX — Ahead of the start of the holiday shopping season, store owners in Christiansted are concerned that after a year of depressed foot traffic and sales, lingering disruption caused by ongoing road repairs may continue to negatively impact

operations.

Rosa Asencio of RJS Handmade Designs has been operating her handcrafted jewelry business from her location on Strand Street for about eight years. “The majority of our clientele is local,” she says. For the past year, her regulars have been complaining about driving into town because of the poor condition of the roads. Last Christmas, foot traffic through Christiansted was so slow that the jewelry store offered free local shipping as a strategy to incentivize customers to shop without necessarily having to visit in person. This year, with roadworks still ongoing, Ms. Asencio, her daughter, and her sister are waiting to see what impact this will have on the family business.

However, Ms. Asencio acknowledges that outside of the busy holiday shopping season, Christiansted needs ways to attract people to the town year-round. The return of jump-up and other activities would be a good start, she says. “More community events, and more security,” Ms. Asencio remarked, calling for increased police presence in the town.

In a different store, a boutique owner who did not wish to be named, echoed Ms. Asencio's sentiments. “Most in downtown would agree that this is one of our worst seasons,” she said, ascribing the lack of foot traffic to the ongoing road repairs and general disruption. “That's discouraging people from coming into town,” the woman opined. “People are not out as much.” She called for a general uplift of the town, suggesting that fallen streetlights and broken sidewalks be fixed. “It just looks like we're in a state of disrepair beyond the roads, you know. I feel like attention needs to be placed on the shopping districts and the island as a whole,” the boutique owner remarked.

Ongoing road repaving is a welcome development, and storeowners are hopeful that much of the work will be completed as soon as possible. However, they express disappointment that it wasn't finished before the holiday season.

Philip Singh, the owner of a food shop on the Water Ghut end of Company Street, came to the Virgin Islands in 1971 with his family. Mr. Singh inherited the shop from his parents, and has watched the ebbs and flows of Christiansted from that location for over 50 years. Mr. Singh says the redevelopment of Times Square hurt business in the area. “They plant a bunch of trees, they put blocks, but where are the people? If you're going to build something, you have to build it for the people. Where are the people to use that?” he queried.

Mr. Singh pointed to the construction of the Aloy “Wenty” Nielsen bypass as another blow to business interests in Christiansted. “The bypass took a lot of people out of town,” he argued. Even when the road paving projects are complete, Mr. Singh believes, traffic through town will not return to previous levels unless deliberate efforts are made to attract people back to Christiansted. “All the little festivals that we used to have in town, they need to start bringing it back,” he argued, saying that activities must be planned year-round, not just for the season.

With more activity out near the Sion Farm and Sunny Isle areas, Mr. Singh said that Christiansted needs to redefine itself as a shopping destination of choice for Crucians and visitors alike. He said that Governor Albert Bryan Jr.'s plan to address blighted buildings is a welcome initiative. Despite the current downturn, he said he would be still willing to invest in the revitalization of Christiansted. “I myself, if I get the opportunity to buy one of these abandoned buildings and fix it up, I would.”

With a robust annual calendar and sufficient third spaces for people to congregate outside of home and work, Christiansted's vibrancy could return, Mr. Singh argues. Like Ms. Asencio, Mr. Singh

called for the return of the traditional jump-up as an anchor activity each month. However, he acknowledged that the loss of the island's south shore refinery was a big blow to commerce across the island. Nevertheless, efforts to encourage circulation through the towns of St. Croix were still needed, he said.

The manager of another boutique, who did not wish to be named, said she believed that the overall economic climate was hurting business.

Her store has a large customer base of locals, and with costs high for food and other necessities, spending on non-essential items like the clothing and accessories her store offers is way down. According to her, sales took a nosedive during the pandemic and have yet to recover. "They are not going out as before, and that is our problem," she told the Consortium. "They are not dressing as before." Not even a recent half-off sale storewide was enough to get customers through the door, she noted. She was holding out hope that the holiday season would bring needed sales, but noted that seasonal success was not enough to carry the business for the rest of the year.

The ongoing road works did not help, the woman said, as she watched a line of vehicles gingerly navigate a deep pothole a few yards west of her storefront. "We in Christiansted need to figure it out," she remarked.