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Aging Runway at St. Thomas Airport Faces Frequent Failures, Full Overhaul Planned for June 2025

With emergency shutdowns disrupting operations, VIPA and Executive Director Carlton Dowe push forward with plans for a full runway resurfacing project set to start mid-2025, pending FAA funding approval

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Jet Blue Airways, American Airlines, and Spirit Airlines aircraft at the Cyril E. King Airport in March 2023. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The runway at the Cyril E King Airport on St. Thomas, constructed in 1990, has far exceeded its lifespan of ten to fifteen years, resulting in “regular incidents of runway pavement failure,” according to Carlton Dowe, executive director of the V.I. Port Authority.

Mr. Dowe testified before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Wednesday, with many of the updates mirroring information shared by VIPA during a [meeting of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance](#) on October 31, 2024.

New this week, however, was information that the aged airport runway is “experiencing regular pavement failures” and “frequent emergency repairs are required to ensure the safety of all travelers.” He lamented that the need for emergency repairs “requires us to shut down CEKA’s only runway, resulting in the diversion of flights to nearby airports and delays for all incoming and outgoing flights.”

Mr. Dowe remarked that while other airports have multiple runways that can be utilized in instances of structural failure, CEKA does “not have that luxury.” Therefore, “any runway repair requires a full shutdown of our airport,” something that Mr. Dowe apologized to passengers for. Still, he maintained that “safety is always and will continue to be our main concern.” VIPA currently pays a response unit to monitor the runway for any faults.

Due to the unsatisfactory nature of the runway, VIPA has already incurred [fines from the Federal Aviation Administration](#) amounting to approximately \$400,000. That sum was reduced by roughly \$150,000 because “we were able to meet with them, have a discussion and show them some improvements that we're making,” explained Mr. Dowe.

VIPA is currently working with the FAA to identify funding for the airport’s runway rehabilitation, the executive director made known. Once authorized by the federal agency, VIPA intends to put the project out to bid. “We are working closely with local and federal agencies involved in the project to accelerate the process to begin as soon as possible,” he promised.

Though the project was initially put out to bid earlier this year, FAA funding was unavailable at the time. “We're coordinating with the FAA on that with the intent of having something out to bid in the next couple of months,” explained Preston Beyer, VIPA director of engineering. With current funding delays, the authority anticipates beginning construction of a new runway in June 2025.

Mr. Beyer explained to Senator Dwayne DeGraff that the project would involve “what is called a mill and overlay: a two-inch mill with a three-inch fill of the entire runway surface.” That work will take place during overnight closures, ensuring that the airport will still be able to operate during daytime hours.

Senator Marvin Blyden, meanwhile, worried that there may be “hiccups” in having FAA funding flow to VIPA with a Republican Congress and President in place come January 2025. “None of us could know that,” Mr. Dowe responded.

With more runway failures occurring as the days go by, VIPA knows that it cannot wait until the [comprehensive rehabilitation project](#) begins. “We have engaged a rapid response team to repair any pavement failures during normal operating hours,” Mr. Dowe clarified. He told lawmakers that the authority has also contracted an asphalt company to conduct repairs at night when the airport is closed.

The V.I. Port Authority is also working diligently to open the western portion of Taxiway Alpha at CEKA, a project that involved the removal of 58,000 square yards of thirty-year-old asphalt. “The asphalt was replaced with Portland cement concrete, providing a smoother surface area, better durability than asphalt and requires less maintenance,” noted Mr. Dowe.

