

Opinion | Proposed DiasporaLink Initiative Could Transform USVI Into Key Digital Gateway to Africa

The bipartisan DiasporaLink Act, championed by Congresswoman Plaskett, proposes a federal study on creating a secure undersea cable and data center to promote economic growth and security between the USVI and Africa.

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Last week, Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett of the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) reintroduced the bipartisan DiasporaLink Act which unanimously passed the House of Representatives in the 118th Congress. This transformative legislation would provide strategic national security advantages to the United States while bringing significant economic benefits to the USVI.

DiasporaLink is envisioned to give the USVI strategic national security relevance and offer Virgin Islanders an opportunity to become direct stakeholders in the global digital economy, while

prospering individually from lower critical infrastructure costs.

What is The DiasporaLink Act?

The DiasporaLink Act is a bill that authorizes the Commerce Department to conduct a study to assess the value, cost and feasibility; that is the economic and strategic benefits of running undersea fiber optic cables from the US Mainland and US Virgin Islands to West Africa. If the study, which is to be conducted within one year of enactment, results in a compelling proposition, Congress could fund the design, deployment, and operations of the project.

The DiasporaLink concept has three components: dual transatlantic submarine fiber optic cables, a data center in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and a secure reliable power source. This multi-layered infrastructure is important to modern day Internet usage. Nighty-five percent of all Internet traffic travels over an undersea or submarine cable, even if you are landlocked. Nearly all Internet data accessed resides in a data center or the cloud. Data centers can consume as much electricity as a metropolitan city the size of Miami, Florida. The energy demand for these facilities usually requires dedicated, low cost, reliable power. This is why data centers are typically built on waterways and increasingly close to nuclear power plants where a kilowatt commonly costs below eight cents.

Who Benefits from DiasporaLink?

USVI residents would directly benefit from DiasporaLink through a direct connection to Africa. This proposed infrastructure would not only attract African businesses, but it would also foster cultural exchange and facilitate academic and scientific research leading to new job growth and economic development in the USVI.

Additionally, the USVI would benefit from an independent power plant being built that has greater power generation capacity and reliability than WAPA to support data centers. The newly constructed data centers in the USVI, to house global digital commerce, would consume up to ten times the energy capability of what WAPA could produce. WAPA does not currently have the power output capacity, reliability or cost structure to support both USVI power needs and data centers intense power demands.

The current plans to replace WAPA energy production and distribution appears to be a multi-generational project, wrought with uncertainty, while a DiasporaLink power plant would have a more urgent construction timeline without concern for shifting priorities. The excess power from this modern power source could be fed into WAPA's distribution network, thus providing power resiliency and subsidizing lower cost of energy for all Virgin Islands households and businesses.

Why Does DiasporaLink Matter?

If built, the DiasporaLink cable connection would give the USVI direct connectivity to Africa with a data center complex to enable African digital commerce on American soil where data protection laws, cyber security safeguards, and reliable power are guaranteed. These conditions would also attract African businesses and tourists to the Territory to gain these benefits, thus spurring economic development in the USVI.

In 2025, over a half billion Africans will be online shoppers. This represents over \$40.5 billion in revenue growth this year alone. Many African consumers buy products online from African e-merchants, who want a safe-digital harbor to conduct ecommerce transactions.

If DiasporaLink advances as an infrastructure project, it would become a federal project that would play a critical role in protecting Americans from cyber and terrorist threats from a continent in deep conflict. Of the over 600 undersea fiber optic cables in the world, none directly connects North America to the continent of Africa. As the most Southern/Eastern part of the United States, the USVI is the ideal location for forward military staging and drug interception in a region of the world that presents state actors and terrorist organization threats.

A secure fiber optic infrastructure is essential to operate autonomous military vehicles, whether on land, sea, or air, as well as gathering intelligence or establishing high security communications outposts. DiasporaLink would empower the Territory to advance America's diplomatic, military, and economic interests in Africa where our country is lagging China and Russia in establishing a digital presence. It is our patriotic duty to support and advocate for America's digital supremacy in Africa and here at home through DiasporaLink.

As we move into the era of reimagining and rebuilding our beloved Virgin Islands, we must recognize the importance of expanding our thinking to encompass the ways that we can advance and diversify our territory's economy, particularly through initiatives like DiasporaLink.

DiasporaLink Act is a generational opportunity for the USVI to benefit from being the nexus of the multi-continental digital economies and playing a critical national security role. Contact Congresswoman Plaskett and let her know you stand behind the DiasporaLink Act study.

Opinion Submitted on Thursday by: Stephan Adams, President and CEO of viNGN, Inc.

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