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New Hilton on St. Thomas Wins Praise, Sparks Calls for Hotel Development on St. Croix and Equity in Tourism Investment

The Hampton by Hilton, completed in 21 months with 126 rooms and local hires, was hailed as the territory's first new hotel in 30 years. Lawmakers urged Haven and the EDA to replicate success on St. Croix, where calls for equity dominated the hearing.

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The new Hampton by Hilton hotel in Havensight, St. Thomas. By. WILLIAM TORRILLO, MANGO MEDIA.

Could new tourism developments be in the pipeline for St. Croix? Lawmakers from the big island leveraged the opportunity to pose that question to the Economic Development Authority when

they appeared before the Committee of the Whole on Thursday. Although tight-lipped with details, EDA officials promised that capital projects would be coming to the Big Island within the next year.

The discussion took place when the EDA was invited to testify on Bill 36-0147, “an act approving the Hotel Development Agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and Haven Development, LLC.”

The bill ratifies the Hotel Development Agreement between the Government of the Virgin Islands and Haven Development, LLC for the construction of a branded hotel located at Parcel No. 2 Estate Thomas, 6F New Quarter, St. Thomas. That hotel, the recently opened Hampton by Hilton St. Thomas, is the first newly constructed hotel in the territory in over 30 years. It features 126 guest rooms, a pool, an indoor and outdoor bar patio, a small kitchen facility for limited breakfast services, a fitness center, and meeting room space.

Through Bill 36-0147, the Government of the Virgin Islands makes available for use “100 percent of the Designated Hotel Room Occupancy Tax and a 7.5 percent Economic Recovery Fee, to pay and secure Hotel Development Notes for a period of 30 years or until such time as the direct investment of \$44,105,254.61 is reimbursed, whichever occurs earlier.” The bill was endorsed by the EDA, with assistant chief executive officer Wayne Benjamin stating, “we believe that Haven Development’s project is in the best interest of the government and residents of the United States Virgin Islands.”

Lawmakers all agreed and found no fault in the request, with all 12 present senators voting favorably. In fact, they spent much of Thursday’s hearing lauding Shaun Miller, a member of Haven Development LLC. He received high commendations for hiring a significant number of local staff and completing the project in only 21 months.

For Senator Kurt Vialet, the opportunity exists for Mr. Miller to replicate his success on St. Croix. “We have plenty land owned by the government of the Virgin Islands. We could find a spot for you where you can put up a hotel in 21 months,” he mused.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, also from St. Croix, encouraged the Economic Development Authority, Port Authority, and Department of Tourism to “please, just do a little more for the island district of St. Croix.” He called for “equity across the territory” noting that St. Croix “truly, truly need your help.”

Mr. Benjamin reassured him that “the promotion of St. Croix, in particular, for investment, remains a priority for the EDA.” He agreed that St. Croix has the “natural resources” for the “type of investors that are now seeking alternative forms of investment.” Mr. Benjamin affirmed that at national conferences, “St. Croix is being looked at.” He could not, however, provide public details. Nonetheless, Mr. Benjamin promised lawmakers that “within the next 12 months, St. Croix is going to be the beneficiary of movement of major capital projects and economic projects.”

Critical to the success of tourism developments is increased airlift. “People can't come when they can't get there,” stated Mr. Benjamin. It’s something that the EDA will therefore “pursue in collaboration with the Port Authority and Department of Tourism, as new airlines look at the Northern Caribbean for further investment.”

"We commit to partnering with investors and this body that would now catapult this territory to an area of destination of premier within the Northern Caribbean as a whole," declared Mr. Benjamin.

