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“We’re Listening”: Dowe Welcomes Public Outcry as VIPA Considers Gradual Fee Increases

Following intense debate in St. John and a calmer discussion in St. Thomas, VIPA’s Carlton Dowe says the agency is open to modifying its marine fee proposal, calling public engagement essential after nearly two decades without adjustments.

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A St. John barge transports vehicles across Pillsbury Sound, a daily lifeline for residents now facing higher fees under the V.I. Port Authority’s proposed marine rate adjustments. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

After a spirited and emotional public meeting in St. John where residents voiced strong opposition to proposed marine and facility fee increases, V.I. Port Authority (VIPA) Executive Director

Carlton Dowe said the exchange was both expected and welcomed as part of the public feedback process. He noted that Tuesday night's follow-up meeting in St. Thomas maintained a measured tone, with stakeholders engaging constructively on how best to implement the long-overdue adjustments.

The Monday night session in St. John had stretched for nearly four hours and featured an outpouring of anger from residents who said the planned increases would make life even more unaffordable on an island already struggling with high costs and limited access to essential services. St. Johnians took particular issue with VIPA's plan to double barge ramp fees from \$3 to \$6 and introduce a new \$2 fee barge per passenger over age 12, excluding the driver and front passenger. The changes would be added on top of the \$65 barge fare already charged by private ferry operators.

Residents also pushed back against VIPA's proposal to begin charging for parking at the Victor Sewer Marine Facility (Customs Lot) in Cruz Bay. The proposed parking system would allow for the first 30 minutes free before fees are applied — an idea that locals say would further squeeze residents who already pay high inter-island transportation costs.

“Have you and your group considered the deep burden and suffering that this plan has put out for the four thousand people that live on St. John?” asked longtime resident Bonnie Corbeil, calling the proposal “another disrespectful move to the people of St. John.” Others, like Abigail Hendricks Kagan, underscored that “we’re the only people who have to pay to come home,” as many St. Johnians depend on daily ferry or barge travel to access medical care, work, and government services in St. Thomas.

Several speakers, including Myrtle Barry and Pastor Elva Richards Goodwin, also condemned the idea of parking fees at the St. John facility, arguing that such measures would further disadvantage the island's residents. Others, like Ian Samuel, urged VIPA to pursue partnerships to make the port economically self-sustaining rather than relying on increased fees.

Despite Mr. Dowe's repeated efforts to explain that VIPA's marine fees have remained unchanged for nearly two decades — even as barge companies raised rates multiple times — residents were largely unconvinced. “You already made a decision...and to hell with St. John,” declared Penny Lambert, her remarks punctuated by applause.

A Softer Tone in St. Thomas

Speaking with the Consortium on Tuesday night following the St. Thomas town hall, Mr. Dowe said misinformation and a lack of understanding fueled much of the anger in St. John. He said the three major ferry companies that operate from the Blyden Marine Terminal in Charlotte Amalie expressed their willingness to accept a smaller, gradual increase instead of the full \$1-per-foot rate initially proposed by VIPA.

“They all said they’re willing to pay at least 50 cents more,” Dowe explained. “Instead of moving straight to the additional \$1 per foot, they’re saying start at 50 cents and then adjust incrementally. That was interesting, and it set a different tone.”

Currently, ferry operators are charged \$1 per foot of vessel length for docking, but that single fee covers 24 hours of unlimited trips. “So, for example, if a 100-foot ferry runs 18 trips a day, they’re only paying \$100 for that entire day,” Dowe said. VIPA had proposed raising the fee to \$2 per foot, but the adjusted plan under discussion now considers a \$1.50 rate based on Tuesday's

feedback.

In addition to docking fees, VIPA intends to increase the BVI passenger fee from \$8 to \$11 — still lower than the \$20 fee charged by the neighboring jurisdiction of the BVI.

While acknowledging concerns about affordability, Dowe said the adjustments are necessary to address long-overdue infrastructure needs. “For 19 years, those fees stayed the same, but the cost of operations, maintenance, and repairs didn’t,” he said. “The vessels that run through our facilities every day cause significant wear, and we’ve absorbed those costs for too long.”

He also noted that VIPA aims to bring parking rates at the waterfront garage in Red Hook in line with those at the airport, which has stirred some pushback locally. “We’re still considering the amounts,” Dowe said, “but the public’s feedback will be taken into account before we finalize anything.”

Next Stop: St. Croix

The final town hall in the series takes place today, Wednesday, October 8, on St. Croix, where VIPA officials expect another round of public scrutiny.

For Dowe, however, the progress made during the St. Thomas meeting was a sign that the process is working. “We knew that regardless of what it is, once we leave out today with some new fees, we’re good,” he said. “At least now, the main ferry companies understand that there has to be some adjustment. We’re listening — and we’re going to strike a fair balance.”