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SkyCity Presents Airport Redevelopment as a Jobs, Training and Brain-Drain Reversal Project

SkyCity says the St. Thomas and St. Croix projects would retain airport workers, create construction and aviation careers, support local businesses and help Virgin Islanders return home, though job totals, wages and hiring targets remain undisclosed.

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A rendering of three planned passenger boarding bridges at Henry E. Rohlsen Airport, part of upgrades SkyCity says would create construction work and long-term aviation, technical and maintenance opportunities on St. Croix. By. SKYCITY

ST. CROIX — SkyCity is presenting the [planned redevelopment](#) of the territory's two airports as more than a construction project, outlining a long-term workforce initiative that it says could

retain existing employees, create skilled careers, support local businesses and provide opportunities for Virgin Islanders living abroad to return home.

During a public hearing Monday at the University of the Virgin Islands on St. Croix, consortium officials connected the proposed modernization of Henry E. Rohlsen Airport and Cyril E. King Airport to employment in construction, aviation operations, maintenance, administration, technical services and project management.

SkyCity also said it intends to establish training and apprenticeship programs and work with local institutions, including UVI, to prepare residents for specialized positions created during construction and the eventual operation of the redeveloped airports.

The presentation offered a broader economic argument for the project as VIPA and SkyCity seek public support for a public-private partnership that would substantially modernize both airports. While the consortium described several employment and training benefits, it did not provide an overall estimate of the jobs expected to be created, anticipated salaries, local-hiring requirements or specific dates for the proposed apprenticeship programs.

Existing Airport Workers Would Retain Jobs

SkyCity Chairman Steve Nackan said the project would provide employment security to existing airport workers, who would retain their jobs as the consortium assumes responsibility for airport operations and maintenance.

The transition would bring the employees into a professionally operated airport system while providing opportunities for training and advancement, according to the consortium.

SkyCity said the redevelopment would also create demand for additional workers throughout the construction and operating phases. The planned improvements on St. Croix are expected to require approximately 16 to 18 months of construction, while the larger and more complicated St. Thomas redevelopment is projected to continue through 2031.

Those projects would involve construction, engineering, airport operations, maintenance, environmental work, technical services, project management, administration and other supporting functions.

The consortium includes Aecon, which is involved in investment, development and construction; New York-based Tikehau Star Infra as an equity partner; Avports as the operations and maintenance partner; and a construction team involving St. Croix-based J. Benton Construction and Consigli Construction of Boston.

Nackan described J. Benton as the partnership's source of local knowledge and experience in managing projects and logistics in the Virgin Islands. SkyCity said local businesses would also have opportunities to participate in the redevelopment and airport operations.

Project Presented as a Path Home

SkyCity Human Resources Director Jimenez Ashby Jr. used his own experience to illustrate how the project could help address the territory's longstanding loss of professionals to opportunities elsewhere. SkyCity's public company profile also identifies Mr. Ashby as part of its team.

Mr. Ashby said he had spent 13 years away from the Virgin Islands working in large consulting environments and the federal government. Although he remained connected to the territory through volunteer work, service on local boards and visits several times a year, he said he had struggled to find a position at home that matched his professional experience and allowed him to continue developing his career.

He began looking for a way to return four years ago but said the type of opportunity he needed did not exist locally until he joined SkyCity in November.

Mr. Ashby described himself as part of the brain drain frequently discussed in the territory and said airport redevelopment could create professional pathways for other Virgin Islanders facing the same decision.

“We are not just building infrastructure; we're building opportunity, right,” he said.

Mr. Ashby said the project could allow residents to develop skills that have not traditionally been available through employment in the territory. He identified technical and project-management expertise among the areas that could be strengthened through the redevelopment.

The opportunity would not be limited to residents currently living in the Virgin Islands, he said. New professional positions could also attract people who left for education or employment and have been unable to find comparable work at home.

Nackan said SkyCity had recently hired another Virgin Islander who would return with children to work on the project's environmental team.

He said such examples reflect the consortium's intention to connect the airport development with the people and communities surrounding it rather than treating it solely as a technical infrastructure program.

Training and Apprenticeships Proposed

SkyCity said it and its partners would develop apprenticeship and workforce-training programs connected to the redevelopment.

The consortium also intends to form relationships with UVI and other community institutions to link residents with the skills required for construction, airport operations and long-term maintenance.

Mr. Ashby said the emergence of new aviation and infrastructure careers could also influence the types of educational programs offered in the territory. Training residents locally could help establish a more sustainable workforce rather than relying entirely on specialists brought in from outside the Virgin Islands.

He said the project could create opportunities for residents to acquire technical experience that would remain useful beyond the initial construction program.

SkyCity did not identify the number of apprentices it expects to accept, the qualifications that would be required, the length of the programs or when applications would open.

The consortium also did not say whether the final P3 agreement would establish formal local-hiring percentages, apprenticeship requirements, wage standards or contracting targets for Virgin

Islands businesses.

Those details will be necessary to determine the full extent of the project's workforce impact and how much of the spending associated with the redevelopment would remain within the local economy.

Opportunities Extend Beyond Construction

The workforce presentation emphasized that construction would represent only one part of the employment opportunity.

After the facilities are completed, the airports would require continued operations, maintenance, security, custodial services, technical support, equipment servicing, administration and management.

The proposed facilities would contain new mechanical and electrical equipment, modern baggage systems, passenger boarding bridges, security infrastructure, air-conditioning systems, generators, chillers and other equipment requiring long-term maintenance and specialized knowledge.

St. Croix would receive an enclosed and air-conditioned domestic check-in area, renovations to the commuter wing, three passenger boarding bridges and replacements or upgrades to major terminal systems.

St. Thomas would receive a new two-story terminal, an integrated baggage-handling system, expanded passenger-processing areas, new retail and concession spaces and nine boarding bridges.

SkyCity said the scale of those improvements would create continuing demand for trained employees capable of managing and maintaining modern airport systems.

The proposed retail and commercial areas could also create opportunities for Virgin Islands businesses to serve arriving and departing travelers. The consortium said local companies would be incorporated into airport participation, although it did not provide details about concession selection, lease terms or procurement procedures.

Accessibility and Public Services Included in Workforce Argument

Mr. Ashby connected the airport project's employment and economic effects to broader social needs in the Virgin Islands.

He said modernized airports could improve travel for senior citizens and people with disabilities, an issue he described as especially important because of the territory's aging population and the number of residents caring for both children and older relatives.

The redesigned facilities would provide more enclosed passenger areas, boarding bridges and updated accessibility features. Those improvements could reduce the physical difficulties experienced by passengers who currently walk outdoors between terminals and aircraft or navigate facilities that do not fully meet modern accessibility expectations.

Mr. Ashby also linked reliable airports to healthcare and education. Residents frequently travel outside the territory for medical services, while visiting physicians and other professionals depend on air transportation to reach the islands.

He said the airports also serve as the territory's connection to educational, professional and economic opportunities elsewhere, allowing Virgin Islanders to participate as global citizens while maintaining links to home.

SkyCity argued that improving those gateways could support the territory's tourism-dependent economy while creating work that extends beyond tourism's traditional hotel, restaurant and visitor-service sectors.

Nackan said more than 65 percent of the territory's gross domestic product depends on tourism and described the airports as critical infrastructure supporting that economy.

Employment Benefits Depend on Project Moving Forward

The proposed jobs, training programs and business opportunities remain tied to completion of the P3 negotiations and the project advancing into construction and operations.

SkyCity said it expects to complete negotiations with VIPA over the P3 agreement by the end of August. The consortium anticipates taking over airport operations on November 1, when the proposed new aviation tariff is also expected to take effect if approved by VIPA's Governing Board.

Construction is expected to begin in the first quarter of 2027 once the agreement, financing and other required approvals are completed.

The tariff and financing structure remain disputed by airlines serving the territory, which support airport modernization and third-party management but have challenged the cost and scale of SkyCity's proposed capital program.

VIPA Interim Executive Director Ava Penn said the agreement and tariff had not been finalized and that the authority would continue considering comments from the airlines and the public.

For the employment promises to be fully evaluated, SkyCity will eventually need to provide measurable commitments covering the number and types of jobs, salary levels, local hiring, apprenticeship participation and contracting opportunities.

For now, the consortium is asking the public to view the airport redevelopment as a long-term investment in the territory's workforce as well as its physical infrastructure—one that could create careers, transfer specialized skills and give some Virgin Islanders a professional path back home.