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Letter to the Editor | A Golden Opportunity to Flatten Our Post-Pandemic Economic Curve

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Dear Editor,

One recent Saturday morning during my daily morning routine, I counted over two dozen boats anchored in Magen's Bay. Suddenly, it dawned on me that this is a golden opportunity for us to leverage this "COVID 19 Safe Harbor" moment to expand our under-appreciated marine industry for a post-pandemic economic revival while creating tremendous job opportunities for young people, such as boat captains, crew members, marine mechanics, shipwrights and other suppliers and servicers of vessels. Prior to the mid-'90s, the USVI was a key player in the marine industry. When the industry was thriving, boaters spent millions of dollars in the Territory.

Since many other jurisdictions throughout the region closed their borders to non-citizens/non-residents of those areas, in their efforts to curtail the spread of the Coronavirus, the US Virgin Islands has re-emerged as harbor of safety to hundreds of vessels. Throughout the Territory - from Brewers Bay to Charlotte Amalie Harbor to Coral Bay and to other areas - mariners have sought refuge in our harbors as each of them do their part to social distance and to flatten the COVID 19 curve.

As with all initiatives, there may be points of concern. Some may be policy-related concerning process, protocol and enforcement; others may be related to personal preferences. All concerns may be valid. Nonetheless, with the proper pre-planning, management and partnerships, whatever concerns may arise can be mitigated for us to seize this once in generations opportunity. It will require finding people with a proven track record of moving things and getting things done, i.e., persons with the necessary expertise, experience, willingness and disciplined focus to drown out the peanut gallery of naysayers, most of whom see the glass as "half empty" as a matter of practice. Time is of the essence.

As with most other jurisdictions in the region, our post-pandemic economic forecast is nebulous and challenged. So far about 4,000 residents have filed for unemployment benefits due to the economic impact of the global pandemic on businesses in the Territory. An estimated total of 20,000 persons, or about two-thirds of working people, may file as the economic fallout continues. By taking a good look at this present opportunity in the marine industry, especially with the increased attention that the territory is receiving from boaters, it may very well help to flatten our post-pandemic economic curve.

If we choose to see the glass as "half full" rather than "half empty", this "COVID 19 Safe Harbor" moment may be the opportunity we've been waiting for to reinvigorate our marine industry, by continuing to welcome these yachts, sail boats, charter boats and other vessels and by managing this process in a safe, eco-friendly and eco-conscious manner. This in turn will help to expand and diversify our entire local economy, and to incentive the private sector in creating sustainable jobs.

Either we decide to drive our bus or we wait on the corner to hitch a ride on someone else's star that may never come. The choice is ours.

Submitted by: Moleto Smith, a St. Thomas resident.