

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Choice Wireless Closes Retail Locations, Announces Upgrades For St. Thomas-St. John

Business / **Published On January 20, 2015 04:32 PM /**

Cynthia Graham **January 20, 2015**



The closures became effective Friday, Jan. 16, with three employees losing their jobs on St. Croix and four on St. Thomas.

According to Tony Shepherd, Choice Communications CEO and general manager, the move is a part of the company's restructuring of its sales strategy.

"The sales strategy is that we will keep one store per island," he said. "Everyone now has one store."

A company press release said new emphasis will be placed on its "mobile sales initiatives to increase direct engagement with the community."

This, the company says, will come in the form of the revamping of its "Choice Express" van service intended to "bring wireless sales and service to places throughout the islands where people gather as a community."

"Our goal is to place more emphasis on proactively engaging with consumers where they live, work and play," Shepherd explained. "The Choice Express will offer sales and support at concerts, sporting events and more, and will complement our three retail centers."

Choice Wireless locations at the Sunshine Mall on St. Croix and in Havensight on St. Thomas remain open. The store at the St. John Marketplace also remains open.

In addition, starting Monday, Jan. 26, Choice Wireless will continue work on its towers to offer enhanced service to its internet customers on St. Thomas and St. John. Service enhancements for St. Croix have not been scheduled.

"What we're doing is called an LTE enhancement," Shepherd explained. "It's the latest technology in providing internet service."

He said the company began upgrading the system last December and will continue construction through the middle of March.

"We will launch on St. John and St. Thomas the first week of April, and later on this year, we will launch in St. Croix," he said.

He said while the upgrade will make internet service "four times faster and much more reliable," customers would not see a spike in their monthly bills.

"There will be no change to our rates," Shepherd said, adding, "we will be absorbing all of the cost to ensure that our customers are provided with better service."

As for when the new Long Term Evolution technology will come to St. Croix, Shepherd would only say he expects to roll it out later in the year.

He pointed out that with the removal of St. Thomas and St. John's customers from the current WiMAX (Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access) technology the company uses, St. Croix's customers would still remain on the older system, but would experience better connectivity.

"By removing St. Thomas and St. John from that technology, we will free up the availability and service for St. Croix," Shepherd said. "So, while St. Croix will not be at the latest technology, their service will be a lot more reliable because they're going to be the only one on the WiMAX technology."

When pressed further about his decision to have St. Croix remain on the older technology long after the other two islands have received upgrades, Shepherd said it comes down to dollars and cents.

He said the cost to install the LTE technology on both St. Thomas and St. John is a total of \$5 million, and it would cost the company the same amount to do the upgrades on St. Croix by itself.

"St. Croix is the bigger island, of course, so I have to spend a lot more to get it done," he explained. "So, the amount of money that I'm spending on St. Thomas and St. John is the same amount of money that I have to spend on St. Croix."

He added, "My budget will allow me to do this first."

Shepherd said there is a combined 29 towers on St. Thomas-St. John, and 36 on St. Croix.

"I have to make sure that it works properly here, with the amount of sites that we have [on St. Thomas and St. John]," he explained. "So, if it doesn't work that well, we'll have to tweak it. I don't want all of our customers having a bad experience. Not that I anticipate anything bad happening, it's just that we have to make sure that it works well."

Shepherd said Choice Wireless, which came to the territory in 1999, has its own team of local technicians who will perform the tower upgrades. And when the new technology is ready to be launched on St. Thomas and St. John in April, he said customers are not expected to experience any interruption of service.

"We'll just tell them to turn off the old modem and they'll be able to crank right up [on the new system]," Shepherd said.

Feature Photo: Shuttered Choice Wireless store in Peter's Rest, St. Croix.