

The Virgin Islands Consortium

\$25 Million Expansion Planned for St. Croix Airport, \$70 Million For St. Thomas

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David W. Mapp, assistant executive director of the Virgin Islands Port Authority, said Wednesday that the Authority has completed the conceptual design for \$25 million in expansion renovations planned for St. Croix's Henry E. Rohlsen International Airport; and a sketch has been completed of the \$70 million in upgrades intended for St. Thomas' Cyril E. King Airport.

Mapp detailed the plans for the expansion renovations of the two airports with *VI Consortium* following a press briefing about other initiatives the Port Authority currently has underway at St. Croix's container port.

Henry E. Rohlsen Airport - St. Croix

The \$45 million difference in the costs for construction upgrades to the terminals of the two airports has to do with what each building needs, Mapp said.

"Dating back several years ago, the airlines had lodged some complaints about the inadequacies and shortfalls that the current terminal layout has relative to today's traveler by air," he pointed out. "What that plan does is it addresses many of the concerns with respect to a hold room, but more importantly, it addresses concerns with how we process baggage, TSA (Transportation Security Administration), Immigration, and the CBP (Customs



David Mapp explains the

expansion renovation plans for the St. Croix airport in a 3-D rendering of the project

In addition, Mapp, the eldest brother of Governor Kenneth Mapp, said the plans allow for the installment of "more updated equipment" at the St. Croix airport.

"I don't know if you've been through the processing system here, but you will find that all of the bags going through TSA, but the checked luggage has to go through this scanning machine and because of the layout there, we only have room for one [machine]," Mapp said. "Many times there is a backlog of bags because every single piece has to go through the scanning machine, even though we have two make-up belts there. We simply, under the layout we have there now, don't have the room for TSA to install a second one of those units."

Furthermore, Mapp said the plans for the St. Croix airport "addresses installation of updated baggage make-up equipment," Mapp said.

"If you think back that the last time you traveled, any bags that you check, you will find that generally you will see a little sticker with a barcode on the bag as well as your check-bag tag," he explained. "What airports have now are systems that scan those things and read them to ensure or minimize bags being lost and misdirected. Our plan will address that."

The final area that will be remedied in the new plans for the St. Croix airport is including concession and retail shops at the facility.

"With respect to passengers, this layout will address the fact that we do not have, not even what can be termed as adequate concession operations in the hold room," Mapp said. "Once folks have gone through all of this screening and processing by TSA and CBP, they're basically stuck. This piece of the program we're seeking to do would address people that are in the hold room, with respect to news and gifts, and [get] some small eatery or eateries in there."

Cyril E. King Airport - St. Thomas

While Mapp praised the St. Thomas airport as being "a lot better" compared to St. Croix's in providing concession areas for travelers, saying, "they have some really beautiful spaces that were built out in there," he pointed out that the facility has simply become too small for the traffic it gets and is bursting at the seams.

"The terminal building is woefully undersized for the deplanements that occur there today. And the fact of the matter is there is no more room to expand that terminal building outward, so the only way to do it would be upward," he explained.

To that end, Mapp said the Authority is considering turning the second floor of the King airport into a passenger waiting/gate area.



"To be able to do that, obviously the installation of some apparatus to get folks who would be in the hold room or gate on the second floor onto a plane," he said. "So, we're reviewing all of that."

With that, Mapp explained the \$70 million price tag for the St. Thomas project.

"Obviously, the cost of converting that second floor, incorporating it into hold-room space and gate space and the associated apparatus that would be needed to accommodate that is much more money than what we're looking at here in St. Croix," he said.

Mapp pointed out that the St. Thomas airport terminal was completed in 1989 and has had no major renovations since that time. He said the St. Croix airport was completed in the late 90s, possibly 98-99, thus already having in place more updated systems. However, he said both airports are in need of the renovations in order to keep with the times.

"[St. Croix] had a little bit more modern systems than the St. Thomas airport did, but both airports have found themselves to be with the same dilemma in that they were both designed pre-9/11," Mapp said. "And all of the regulations that were imposed by Congress relative to passenger screenings at airports, and so, in reality, we need to be able to fix both of these airport terminals to be able to accommodate that required processing."

Project Timeline

While the conceptual design for the Rohlsen airport is completed, the construction design grants of the Federal Aviation Administration are now in earnest.



3-D rendering of long term plans

for the expansion renovations of the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on St. Croix

"I know that in the recent conversation I had with the FAA regarding this, one of the rules that they told me exists is that in order for us to get approval on certain things, we would have to actually have these documents prepared in hand," he said. "So, we're trying to figure out how we're going to move forward with that on a timetable. But we are exploring how we can finance some of these capital improvements and meet them, which are considered major capital improvements for both terminal buildings. We are in the process of looking at that now and hopefully, on the other end of that tunnel, will be success for us and we'll be able to get these things done. I cannot give you a timetable, all I can tell you is we've already begun the process of trying to get this thing started as soon as we can."

Who's Paying For It?

Mapp said the FAA's Airport Improvement Program, a federally-funded initiative that provides grants to public agencies — and, in some cases, to private owners and entities — for the planning and development of public-use airports that are included in the [National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems](#), will cover 90 percent of the cost of the expansion projects on St. Croix and St. Thomas, and the Port Authority will pay the remaining 10 percent.

In order to keep up its end of the obligation, he said the Authority is looking into funding the projects through passenger facility charges (PFCs).

"You actually pay PFCs now and you've probably been paying them on airline tickets for the last 20 years. It is an FAA-approved and allowed fee that is put on to one's airline ticket, which that money is dedicated for specific-approved projects by the FAA," Mapp explained.

In fact, Mapp said when St. Croix's airport began renovations of its terminal in 1994, "several million dollars was raised to do the renovation expansion of Henry Rohlsen through the PFCs that were collected on both St. Croix and St. Thomas."

He continued: "We're now collecting on St. Croix for projects on St. Thomas. The good thing about this is we're one system, so we can collect at one airport to help the other airport. So, since we collected from St. Thomas to do what we have here now in the terminal building on St. Croix, we're now collecting to do some targeted work in St. Thomas. But the goal is to try to figure how we can consolidate all of this work and capture all of the PFC funds in such a way that we can be able to generate money to start construction."

Mapp said discretionary funding may not be a route the Authority takes in funding the projects.



"I can tell you that trying to get this done with discretionary money is probably next to impossible," he said. "I'm not saying it's impossible, I'm just saying it's next to because of the amount of lobbying that has to be done."

Mapp pointed out that the expansion renovations of the two airports would not include the airports' runways. He said St. Croix's airport already had its runway upgraded to a 10,000 pavement strip in 1992.

"We don't foresee anymore lengthening of that; the fact of the matter is there aren't that many 10,000-foot strips in the Caribbean," he said.

Airports And Tourism

Particularly for St. Croix, Mapp said there needs to be greater synergy between the work of the Port Authority and off shoots of the island's tourism industry, specifically the hotel

industry. He highlighted the fact that hotel development on the island is important to airline carriers including St. Croix on their itineraries.

"What we have to do is work along with our partners in tourism and the community because the key thing here for St. Croix is that people don't go to airports to vacation," he said. "So, while we're putting the infrastructure in the building to be able to accommodate these passengers, there must be a competent construction of hotel rooms to encourage airlines to bring their passengers to stay."

He went on to say that within the last year, he, Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe, and Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty had been "bombarding the airline executives" to send flights to St. Croix. And just a few weeks ago, during a trip to Denver, Colo., the group met with nine different airlines.

"Some expressed interest, some none, and some talked about future interest, but the one common thing they all said to us is 'please keep us advised of what your island's hotel development plans are and the progress of those plans because that's important in our strategic planning for the airlines, relative to staging equipment and setting up destinations in new markets'," Mapp explained, adding, "So, the public side, we know, we're responsible for providing the infrastructure to get the folks here, but there needs to be some kind of movement on what developers plan to do, relative to hotel development."

Nonetheless, Mapp praised Dowe for his efforts in moving the St. Croix project forward.

"That's one wonderful thing about Carlton, if you present an idea and it makes sense, he runs with it," Mapp said.