

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Will The Rebirth Of Cuba As A Tourism Destination Affect The VI? Commissioner Nicholson-Doty Responds

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ST. THOMAS -- "Does a rising tide lift all boats, or does a destination's piece of the visitors' pie get smaller as a new destination becomes accessible to the world?"

That was the question posed in Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty's opening remarks while giving testimony at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall here, during a Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture and Planning hearing, chaired by Sen. Janette Millin Young, and organized to discuss the impact that the normalization of U.S./Cuban relations will have on the territory's tourism product.

Millin Young played a video at the opening of the hearing that showed initiatives currently being undertaken in Cuba -- including hotel and resort development -- in anticipation of the inevitable change.

But Nicholson-Doty, while acknowledging the potential impact on the territory caused by Cuba's reopening, said the territory should remain stable if it continues to refine its own product and, where possible, forge ties with Cuba.

And she sighted Columbia as a example of her position on the unfolding developments, a country that was plagued by drug-related violence and emerged as a powerhouse in tourism in 8 years -- from 2002 to 2010 -- and continues to see sustained growth today. Yet, the surrounding countries did not witness a decline; instead, they grew. Columbia lifted the tide.

"The bottom line, Columbia's growth does appear to have been at the expense of its neighbors," Nicholson-Doty said. "All boats were lifted by significant interest in travel to Latin America.

If a place isn't considered safe to live, it will certainly raise concerns as vacation destination. - DOT Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty.

"I believe that the recent developments around the travel to Cuba will have a positive impact on the Caribbean region as a whole, including the U.S. Virgin Islands."

The commissioner said the ability of Americans to gain access to a destination that was once off limits, is sure to spark interest in the Caribbean, as travelers seek to satisfy their curiosity about our region as a whole, not just Cuba.

But while she believes the Caribbean will experience overall growth, Nicholson-Doty stressed that it would be "totally unrealistic not to acknowledge and plan for the inevitable risks associated with a new, large competitor in the region."

"We will face increased competition for visitors in the Caribbean, especially during the 2-5 years as travel restrictions are slowly lifted. There is a curiosity for Cuba, having been off limits for half a century, and it should be anticipated that there will be some initial impact on visitor arrivals," she said.

Nicholson-Doty, in her ninth year as commissioner having served for eight years with the Governor John P. de Jongh administration, said the territory's tourism product's downfall would be seen if its people become arrogant and complacent. She said the advancement of the islands' unique and historic offerings must be seen as critical, "and we must change our attitudes."

Recently recognized as Person of the Year by St. Thomas' Rotary Club, Nicholson-Doty added that the USVI's opening as a tourism destination emerged strong in the wake of Cuba's closing. Therefore, she went on, the opening of Cuba should serve as a "a wake up call."

"Visitors now have one more option," she stressed. And while it will take years for Cuba to strengthen its tourism infrastructure, with investors lying in wait to help the island achieve its goal, "the delivery of an exceptional experience, rooted in excellent customer

service, is a variable that we can control," she remarked.

"We should not wait for the opening of Cuba to adjust our attitudes and embrace a spirit of hospitality, which really is deep-seated in our culture," Nicholson-Doty advised.

The commissioner also highlighted the immediate advantages of the territory in relation to U.S. travelers, including entry without passport, as compared to Cuba's requirement of a visa (60 percent of Americans don't have passports), and because English is the territory's main language. Cubans speak Spanish.

Improvements to seaports, airports, and hotel developing is paramount, particularly on St. Croix, but Nicholson-Doty said the territory as a whole needs to "seriously improve our accommodations offerings." She revealed that the territory is already losing market share to some Caribbean destinations," and mentioned "safety and security" for visitors as indelible to the product's continued success.

"If a place isn't considered safe to live, it will certainly raise concerns as a vacation destination. I repeat, we must address our customer service," the commissioner said.

And Nicholson-Doty raised the prospect of collaborating with Cuba in areas where mutual interests of growth intersects, including, "sports, recreational fishing and yachting," she said, adding that offices could also be erected in Cuba, under the auspice of the U.S. embassy to engage with a market of first-time tourists landing on the island.

The commissioner said DOT will also increase its spend on advertising to continuously grow the territory's unique brand.

"Between October 2015 and January 2016, more than \$2 million in TV, digital and print advertising, along with social media, will be placed, with 25 percent of this spend dedicated solely to St. Croix," Nicholson-Doty said.

So while it remains true that the territory should be concerned about an emergent Cuba, the island's growing prominence does not spell doom for the USVI's tourism product, according to the commissioner.

"Our greatest concern should and must be: are we consistently delivering an exceptional experience for the individuals that are now visiting the USVI?" she asked in conclusion.