

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Simulation Center To Drive St. Croix Economy With 20,000 Hotel Room Stays Per Year; \$30 Million Minimum Economic Boost

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ST. CROIX -- University of the Virgin Islands School of Medicine almost died before being birthed when fights between U.V.I. leaders, Senate and Government Officials over where the facilities should be built erupted last year. Some wanted the school to built in its entirety on St. Croix, while others, including U.V.I. President Dr. David Hall, called for a half-half approach: the simulation center here and the classroom building on St. Thomas. A chief dissenter of the half-half idea was Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who feared that St. Croix would once again be at a loss.

But the big island may have wound up getting the better end of the stick after all, if [Dr. Benjamin Sachs](#), dean of the medical school, is to be believed.

"The simulation center will need a minimum of 20,000 hotel rooms per year for all of these doctors flying in to use it," Dr. Sachs told The Consortium when asked if any studies had been conducted to determine the school's economic impact on the territory. Dr. Sachs said he hadn't even factored in the added benefits of these doctors traveling with their families during the winter season, suggesting that the impact on hotel room stays could be even greater.

"And they want four and five-star hotels. You're talking about the best cardiologists, the best neurologists, neurosurgeons, orthopedists in the United States and the Caribbean, country. And the people who are going to benefit in the country," Dr. Sachs said.



Yesterday's School of Medicine

groundbreaking ceremony was attended by local officials, business leaders, J.F.L. representatives, physicians and U.V.I. faculty and staff.

The simulation center will also have a minimum economic impact of \$30 million annually, Dr. Sachs made known, with the medical school in St. Thomas having the equivalent minimum impact of \$30 million. "Any place that has built an accredited medical school has seen incredible economic impact," he said.

But there are still challenges ahead of the school's opening. Dr. Hall told The Consortium during the simulation center's groundbreaking ceremony here on Thursday that he could not guarantee accreditation from the Liaison Committee for Medical Education (L.C.M.E.) Advisory Board, which the school would need before opening. He said the school will reapply for accreditation in August of this year, but the decision was made to move forward with construction because the aim is to open the medical school in July, 2017, and final accreditation approval, if granted, would not come until February, 2017.

[UVI School of Medicine Groundbreaking event](#)

A major part of receiving accreditation, Dr. Hall went on, was proving to the L.C.M.E. that appropriate funding was in place. He said while monies for construction of both facilities had been secured, funding to keep the facilities running was indelible to success, and

said he would continue soliciting community leaders and those with the wherewithal to invest in the school. Dr. Hall added that he's "very confident" accreditation would more than likely be granted if \$10 million could be raised. The reason for this, he explained, is because the L.C.M.E. board does not view tuition on its own as a viable source of financial stability.

And Dr. Hall said he wasn't concerned that a bill seeking to raise U.V.I.'s yearly debt service from \$700,000 to \$1 million [was vetoed](#) by Governor Kenneth Mapp in October, 2015. He said subsequent conversations with Mr. Mapp had produced positive results, in favor of raising the limit, which S.



U.V.I. President Dr. David Hall

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"I want to say congratulations to U.V.I. This is certainly a big step in the right direction," said Senator Kenneth Gittens. "The medical school on both campuses will help bridge the gaps in our healthcare needs across the territory. We do have a long way to go, but I pledge my support because I see potential and perseverance of school administrators to see this through."

Senator Neville James also shared optimism while throwing his weight as Senate President behind the school: "My father was a doctor, so anything that has to do with the furtherance of healthcare for the people of the Virgin Islands has my full support." Mr. James said when his father, the late Randall "Doc" James, came back to the territory in the '40s, the healthcare was very limited. "So to see we're at the point today where we are looking at a medical school, that's an important milestone to me," he said.

Senator Novelle Francis said if the funding that Dr. Hall said is so desperately needed to strengthen the prospect of accreditation is not raised in time, "absolutely, I think the Senate should play a role in providing the funds, because the medical school represents an economic boost to the territory. We will do everything in our power to assist and support U.V.I.," Mr. Francis said.

And Senator Sammuell Sanes, while noting the controversy that erupted last year in regards to the school's location, said the groundbreaking event represented a turning

point for the residents here.

"Overall, I think it's a good thing for St. Croix," Mr. Sanes said. "It will bring jobs and improve our quality of life, and to me, that's something very important."

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