

The Virgin Islands Consortium

James Opposes Plaskett's Decision To Refuse Obama's Invite To Cuba; Praises The President For Game-Changing Trip

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ST. CROIX -- Senator Neville James said on Wednesday that he was not in support of freshman Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett's decision to turn down President Barack Obama's invite to be part of his delegation making the historic trip to Cuba, especially as she's the territory's voice at the table in Washington.

"While I am diametrically opposed to her decision and her reasons for not accepting President Obama's invitation to join him, ultimately it was her decision and I respect it," Mr. James said.

The Senate president said that the territory must decide which route it's going to take as restrictions to the island nation continue to ease. And he praised Mr. Obama's bold steps in resetting the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba.

"Obama's pivotal decision to reestablish the United States' relationship with Cuba opens many doors for both Americans and Cubans alike. For us in the Virgin Islands, we must make the decision on whether to react defensively and in the process hinder prospects of mutualism, or use this opportunity to help us catapult our economy towards prosperity. I commend the president for breaking down these barriers that have obstructed progress for over 50 years," he said.

Mr. James believes that the best way to handle the lift on the U.S. travel ban to Cuba lies in the territory's cooperation and collaboration with the federal government. The Virgin Islands, one of America's closest island neighbors to Cuba aside from Puerto Rico, should remain at the table as Obama's administration continues build their relationship with the island nation.

"As this territory operates as a major player in the business of tourism in this region, it is our responsibility to be in a position that's ahead of the imminent curve being thrown at us, while embracing this moment as one which better unifies the Caribbean," he said.

Mr. James said on his recent trip to the Sea Trade Cruise Global Conference, hosted by the FloridaCaribbean Cruise Association, he was briefed by dozens of tourism experts and cruise industry leaders who all agree that the territory needs to be appropriately prepared to respond to the opportunities as well as challenges that will lie ahead in the wake of the historic reset of relations between Cuba and the U.S.

At the 2016 Sea Trade State of the Industry Address, executives from Carnival Cruise Line—a major cruise ship player in the Virgin Islands—stated that their company is optimistic and excited about what Cuba has to offer the industry and vice versa. They went on to assure Caribbean ports that they have nothing to worry about since Cuba will help shine a brighter light on the region. Cuban native Frank Del Rio, who has ascended to the prestigious position of president and CEO of Norwegian Cruise Line, also mirrored sentiments given about Cuba's opening benefiting the Caribbean cruise industry.

"The Caribbean is the most popular region for cruising—crushing other areas of the world with 42 to 43 percent of all deployments going through our area. Because of our geographic location, we are being looked at as a beneficiary of Cuba's reopening," James said. "As more passengers flock to visit the island nation on cruise vacations, itineraries that include Cuba can only go so far south. The Northern Leeward Islands, where we are located, will reap said benefits, in terms of our marine tourism product. As one of the top cruise ports, we should be preparing for that influx, and using it to our advantage."

While the cruise industry encouraged Caribbean islands that Cuba's newfound friendship with the U.S. would be a net positive for the region, James made it clear that he understands the public's concern that the other side of this momentous occasion shows a possible negative impact on tourists visiting the Territory by air. That apprehension, however, is speculative and lacks empirical data to back it up, he said.

“On my return to St. Croix following the Sea Trade conference, I witnessed air charters from Miami International Airport which were available to Cuba, so it is a fact that the wave of excursions to the island has already begun,” James stated. “Tourism aficionado, the late John McCleverty, always told me that your current cruise ship passengers are your next overnight guests, if you make them feel at home while in port. If we benefit in the cruise ship area because of Cuba’s reopening, we’ll benefit in the airlift area as well.”

Feature Image: President Barack Obama meets with dissidents and other local Cubans at the U.S. Embassy in Havana (Telegraph, U.K.).

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