

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Plaskett Explains Why She Could Not Travel To Cuba With Obama

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett

ST. CROIX -- In a wide-ranging interview on Tuesday, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett explained to The Consortium the reasons why she could not attend President Obama's historic trip to Cuba; spoke about the outcomes of the panel discussion with her Congress colleagues and technology executives that prevented her from making the trip; made known some of the actions her office has taken to better the lives of Virgin Islanders; and explained why she does not view 2017's Centennial event as a celebration, but rather a commemoration.

Ms. Plaskett said yesterday she fully supports the president's efforts in Cuba, but she quite frankly could not make the trip. And the notion that her less-than-informative [press release](#) stating why she could not go, was a sign of her displeasure with the president's efforts, is a simply not the case, she said.

"What I said was we were unable to go. And for us, what was really important in the press release was this group coming," Ms. Plaskett said.

"We had representatives of Google, who were having conversations with V.I.N.G.N. (Virgin Islands Next Generation Network), Broadband V.I. and the Research and Technology Park about partnering with them. We had American Express, representatives of General Dynamics where we talked about expanding our airports. Having these kinds of discussions along with the members who sit on committees like the Judiciary, Energy and Commerce, Financial Services, Small Business, Intelligence Committee -- I thought that that was the more substantive takeaway and that's what we focused a lot in the press release."

In total, six members of Congress were here with the delegate, two of whom had told the president that they could not make it to Cuba because of Ms. Plaskett's engagement. Ten executives from various organizations who Ms. Plaskett diligently courted to see first-hand the territory's needs, in hopes of, among other things, relaying their findings to their colleagues in Congress, also attended the panel discussions.

"But that's not to say I wasn't honored, or I wasn't trying to get to Cuba as well," Delegate Plaskett went on.

"When we got the information, this event had been planned for two months," she said, speaking of the panel discussions. "And I'm a freshman; I'm not on top of the list of who gets invited to Cuba, so I get invited a week before and so we're scrambling, calling to find out can the panel discussion be canceled. No, it can't because people have tickets that are nonrefundable, and people have adjusted their schedules and they've made plans. And so I said, 'Okay, can I meet you on the tarmac, Mr. President? Can Stacey get a different route and be there at attention, waiting?' They're like no, you have to come. And then I'm looking at can I charter a flight, looking at the House rules about finances and money, but it was just too prohibitive to get there Sunday morning.

"So then the conversation was about who could we use as a substitute, and the White House said there is no substitute, you're the member, you're invited, you need to go. We then thought about what would be the cost of me cancelling and going, and what would be the benefit of going. But cancelling can mean that among these members of Congress, my reputation now is that I can flake out on them at the last minute when something more interesting comes up. And I don't know when I can get back on the schedule, because even though we've been planning for two months, this took much longer for me to harass and cajole and get them to agree to come to a freshman's place.

"And then the thing was what would I have gained if I went anyway. Knowing that there were 37 members of Congress, plus governors, cabinet members, past administration people, and knowing that because of my seniority I was not going to be sitting on the plane anywhere near the president, and knowing that the president's schedule was not always with the delegation -- I just felt that I'm only going to attend places that are

relevant to the Virgin Islands. And I told them Cuba, Panama and other places in the Caribbean -- these are important things for us as the Virgin Islands to be a part of and to associate ourselves with.

"So when we learned about the event in Cuba, we knew we wanted to be there, but knowing that I've had conversations one-on-one with the president, behind closed doors with the Black Caucus, in Democratic retreat meetings, interfacing with him about what the issues are in the Virgin Islands and how he can be supportive, that I didn't see the benefit to it, and the White House agreed with us."

The delegate's detailed explanation comes as residents and diasporas have criticized her for not being present in Cuba, and as many have questioned her stance on the reopening of the island nation based on comments she's made in the past [criticizing](#) the president.

"Renewed diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba present real challenges to the territory, specifically, in competition for U.S. tourism dollars and as a potential diversion of port and manufacturing opportunities in the Caribbean," Ms. Plaskett said in February.

"In my discussions with the Obama Administration and fellow lawmakers I have emphasized the need for the United States to prioritize the interests of its own island territories above the interest of diplomatic relations with Cuba.

"I view it unwise and irresponsible to fully embrace a changing dynamic with Cuba in the absence of a careful and deliberate recognition of the economic impacts on our community and on the future of the people of the territory.

"Investments in Virgin Islands capital improvements for basic infrastructure needs, such as roads, ports, schools and hospitals, must be a priority addressed by Congress in accordance with its Constitutional obligation above any potential aid to the Cuban government," Ms. Plaskett concluded.

Feature Image: Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett address an audience during a firefighter ceremony at Government House on Tuesday (VIC, Ernice Gilbert).