

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sustainable Economic Recovery Takes Center Stage At St. Croix Chamber of Commerce Annual Meeting

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ST. CROIX -- With just over 100 of its members from the private and public sectors in attendance, the St. Croix Chamber of Commerce called its annual breakfast meeting to order Tuesday morning with a full house of business owners, government representatives, and residents concerned about the island's economy, Governor Kenneth Mapp's proposed five-year plan, the arduous process of starting a Virgin Islands business and more, the chamber announced Wednesday.

Chamber Chairperson Kimberly McCollum declared it a "pivotal time in the history of the Virgin Islands."

To be successful “we need input and work from every one of us,” Ms. McCollum said, referring to the chamber’s mission to work closely with the community and government leaders to keep the issues affecting all residents at the forefront of policy making in the territory. She said that last year’s activities demonstrated the chamber’s commitment to do just that including: testifying at legislative hearings about crime, public health, taxes on cigarettes, hazardous duty pay, noise pollution and residency requirements for EDC companies; hosting numerous ribbon cuttings and business afterhours networking events, and the Ask Them Yourself event with internet providers.

The chamber awarded scholarships for higher education—several in collaboration with the Hotel and Tourism Association, served on the University of the Virgin Islands President’s advisory board, supported public television programming and other non-profit organizations such as those dealing with domestic violence and sexual assault, youth skills training and empowerment, and the Department of Education’s reading program, and signed a strategic alliance agreement with the Small Business Administration to enhance the development of business on St. Croix.

“As 2017 is just getting underway, we have already hit the ground running with the efforts to address the Governor’s 5 Year Strategic Plan,” Ms. McCollum said, informing the membership that she would testify at Tuesday evening’s meeting of the Legislature’s Finance Committee.

Also presenting at the breakfast meeting was Small Business Administration’s St. Croix Area Manager Wayne Huddleston who pledged the support of the federal government in business and economic development on St. Croix through establishing SCORE and the Emerging Leaders initiative--two of the agency’s signature programs. Over 11,000 SCORE volunteers throughout the nation help thousands of entrepreneurs start small businesses and achieve new levels of success in their existing businesses. SCORE helps to remove the “scary” parts of the labyrinth of starting a business, said Mr. Huddleston, who is seeking volunteers in the business community to pair with hopeful St. Croix entrepreneurs to share their knowledge and expertise. SCORE is a way for businesses to give back to the community, Mr. Huddleston said.

Leon Hughes, founder and chief executive officer of NEARiX, a software solutions company on St. Croix, spoke about his experiences as a member of SBA’s Emerging Leaders Class of 2016. During an intensive seven month training period, Mr. Hughes travelled to classes in Puerto Rico, meeting with SBA leaders and chief executives from other small businesses to learn new ways of leveraging their resources for maximum success.

Mr. Hughes, the only emerging leader selected from St. Croix, and owner of the youngest business represented in the class, was chosen through a very competitive process which permits only one in five applicants to be accepted. The trainees were required to have been in business for at least three years and show annual revenues of at least \$400,000.

For Mr. Hughes, it was an opportunity to demonstrate that “we do have good business sense and acumen on St. Croix,” he said. For him, the networking opportunities, development of a three year business growth plan, and the opportunity to compete on a larger stage for a Goldman Sachs internship made it all worthwhile. Hughes said he took his responsibility to represent St. Croix well among the other CEO’s quite seriously.

“Hopefully, I impacted them as much as they impacted me,” he concluded.

Mr. Hughes’ success in the program has been instrumental in the launching of an Emerging Leaders initiative on St. Croix with March 7 as the application deadline, said Huddleston. Last December, The chamber signed off on a Strategic Alliance agreement to further develop St. Croix’s small businesses. For more information about the SBA’s programs, Huddleston said to contact SBA at (340) 718-5381.

During a lively question and answer period, annual meeting attendees called for the chamber to work on a “matrix of solutions and ideas” specifically to address the economic recovery of St. Croix. With one member citing the need to change St. Croix’s “economic isolation,” former Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Alicia Barnes recommended position papers and public forums. Atty. Anna Cecile O’Neill Leo, district counsel of the Virgin Islands Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs pledged to work with the Chamber to help streamline the business license application process which is often stated as a deterrent to starting a St. Croix business, and former Judge Soraya Diase Cofelt, a member of the St. Thomas/St. John Chamber of Commerce, commended the St. Croix organization for taking the initiative to bring the private sector, the legislature and other representatives of government together recently to recommend actionable alternatives to the Governor’s “sin tax” proposal to restore solvency to the general fund.

“We know that we will not always be in agreement with the executive or the legislative segments of the government, but our goal is to form relationships that allow us the privilege to earn their ear and their consideration for our positions. Even in times when we appear adversarial, we must always remain respectful of each other,” Ms. McCollum said.

Frederick Handleman, the chamber’s executive director, swore in the new and returning board members who affirmed their commitment to carry out the duties associated with being a board member. They are McCollum, Edgar Bengoa, Joel Lee, Shack Hawkins, John Lewis, Cassandra Dunn, Ryan Nelthropp, Gechani Martinez, Patricia Worede, Bill Bass, Diane Butler, Neal Canton, Angela East Kean, Debbie Henry, Cynthia Arnold, Kirk Thompson, Emily Weston, Nancy Torres and Jim Oliver. She thanked outgoing members, Sandra Harty Gutierrez, Isabel Brady, Margi Levy and Mark Eckard for their service.

The National Anthem and Virgin Islands March were performed by Michonde Delauney, a ninth grader at the St. Croix Educational Complex.

The chamber will host its Annual Gala on Saturday, March 4, 6 p.m. at St. George’s Botanical Garden. Internal Revenue Bureau Director Marvin Pickering will be the guest speaker. Visit www.stxchamber.org or call 718-1435 for more information about the gala and how to nominate businesses and individuals in a variety of categories for recognition this year.