

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI Cruise Calls To Decline By 11 Percent Through 2018; Stay-Over Visitors Up 4.3 Percent

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ST. CROIX -- A declining cruise line industry, developments in the airline and stay-over markets, as well as a new slogan for marketing the Virgin Islands were all discussed during Legislature meetings on Tuesday at the Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room in Frederiksted. Department of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty, gave testimony to update the activities of the department.

The key issue discussed was the development and maintenance of the tourism product within the Virgin Islands. According to Mrs. Nicholson-Doty, visitor cruise line arrivals is estimated to drop 11 percent through 2018. She said that although there was an increase in calls on St. Croix, the overall arrivals on St. Thomas had been declining.

“Unfortunately, cruise traffic has not registered the same growth as overnight visitors. The USVI has had a significant reduction in calls in 2016 and this trend is projected to continue through 2018,” said Mrs. Nicholson-Doty. Cruise traffic in St. Thomas is projected to decline by 11 percent through 2018, while St. Croix is expected to see an increase of 48 percent over the same period. But the overall drop will still be about 11 percent, as St. Thomas registers the lion's share of cruise traffic.

According to the commissioner, St. Thomas received 535 calls in 2016; is expected to receive 489 calls in 2017, and 478 calls in 2018. There were 25 calls on St. Croix in 2016, which will increase to 37 in 2017, and by 7 more to 44 in 2018.

Senator Tregenza Roach, displeased with the numbers, questioned why St. Thomas was losing cruise volume while St. Croix is experiencing growth.

“Forget the fact that the St. Thomas numbers are very different, still we have to then ask ourselves the question, if St. Thomas is your primary port in the Virgin Islands in regards to drawing cruise ship visitors here, are we doing enough to specifically market St. Thomas?” Mr. Roach stressed that his remarks were not to be construed as a St. Thomas vs St. Croix issue, but rather a sincere attempt to understand what was the cause of the decline, and what could be done to rectify it.

Considering comparisons to St. Martin and the British Virgin Islands cruise traffic, Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said the islands had recently signed new deals with cruise lines, ensuring additional traffic to their ports -- many times, at the expense of the territory. Even so, she said, while the USVI's drop in numbers was more substantial than St. Martin, that island had experienced a decline in 2016.

She went on to state the department's plans to move forward without negating the requirements for continued assertive efforts in cornering the cruise market. These plans were initiatives meant to move the cruise market forward on St. Thomas, while building the market share on St. Croix. Some of these initiatives are:

- Implementing a long requested harbor transportation on St Thomas;
- The establishment of a separate marketing plan for the cruise segment under the umbrella of the Ports of the Virgin Islands;
- Improving the Gallows Bay facility, targeting smaller luxury cruise ships to St Croix.

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty—giving more details on the different distributions—briefed stay-over visitor percentages. She says the U.S. Virgin Islands Bureau of Economic Research (BER) reports stay-over visitor arrivals to the territory were up 4.3 percent in 2016 as compared to 2015. When speaking about airlift numbers, she reported a fluctuation.

Also discussed was D.O.T.'s plans to improve marketing efforts. These efforts included a \$3 million investment in advertising, and a collaboration with the local band Fusion to develop a new “catchy” jingle to update the “Tourism is all of Us” campaign. “We will continue using Pressure's popular song ‘Virgin Islands Nice’ [and] he will work with the D.O.T. on an updated line for the new slogan “Virgin Islands Real Nice”, said Mrs. Doty. D.O.T. will also develop new and creative television, print and digital media products, 80 percent of which will be sourced by local companies and talented by local residents.

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty also provided testimony on the successful impact advertising the Centennial has had on the tourism product. According to her, the investment of almost a million dollars dedicated to the marketing of the Centennial has yielded almost \$4 million in revenues, with 1,513 packages sold to date, and a total of 6,355 room nights.

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