

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Competition From Neighboring Ports Rising, Mapp Administration Hones In On Visitor Experience For Cruise Ship Passengers

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ST. THOMAS -- With competition from neighboring ports of call increasing, the focus of the second meeting of the Ports of the Virgin Islands, Charlotte Amalie Task Force held earlier this month, was on advancing plans to improve the experience for cruise ship passengers, according to the Dept. of Tourism, which made known details of the meeting in a release issued Wednesday.

At the heart of the matter, according to Governor Kenneth Mapp, is the need to re-engineer the Virgin Islands product and elevate the guest experience of the destination:

"We are competing in a changing, dynamic environment and are in need of a complete shake-up of our business models," Mr. Mapp said. "We need to develop not only what people want today, but also anticipate their future needs. The key is to respond to visitors even before they realize what they need. That's what this task force is all about."

Department of Property and Procurement Commissioner, Lloyd Bough Jr., reported that the deadline for submission of proposals to establish a harbor transportation service in the Charlotte Amalie Harbor had been extended to June 23 because of the strong interest in the contract, and because of the high volume of inquiries and questions the department had handled, including site visits by prospective bidders.

Task force members agreed with the need for the RFP process to allow for multiple operators, possibly operating vessels of varying sizes, and that the contract period should be extended beyond three years in light of the capital investment required. The evaluation and selection process is now expected to be complete by the end of August, contract execution by the end of October, and service possibly implemented by the end of the year.

Dept. of Public Works Commissioner, Gustav James, updated members on the first phase of the \$40 million Veterans Drive project, the bid for which will be released by June 15. The bid evaluation for the project, which will feature widened lanes on the coastal thoroughfare in downtown Charlotte Amalie, is expected to last for two to three months with a contract award scheduled for the end of September 2017, according to the D.O.T. release.

Mr. James reported the Crown Bay project has been rebid and an award recommendation made, while there was discussion on monitoring and evaluating the progress of the Main Street enhancement project as well as a block-by-block approach to the renovations, which includes 24-hour operations on non-cruise ship days.

Discussions also focused on the importance of dredging the Charlotte Amalie Harbor to accommodate larger class vessels and raising the \$12 million investment funding for this project.

Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty, reported on recent meetings with Carnival Corporation and MSC Cruises.

The task force proposed the establishment of a berthing committee to optimize the use of all five berths on St. Thomas. They also proposed the need for improving communication with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and congressional officials to secure additional officers for the Territory's seaports and airports. This initiative should improve the passenger experience as well as attract increased calls from vessels with significant numbers of foreign passengers, according to the release.

The group also discussed a "Ports of the Virgin Islands" communications and advertising campaign to promote the competitive advantage of duty-free products "Purchased in the U.S. Virgin Islands", while confirming plans for a Town Hall meeting with the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA), cruise line executives and the Virgin Islands community, scheduled for Thursday, July 20 at Frenchman's Reef & Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort at 4 p.m.

The task force draws in representatives from retail stores, ground transportation operators, spirits distributors, restaurants, the Virgin Islands Port Authority, the West Indian Company, the Department of Tourism, the Department of Public Works and the Office of the Governor.

Members of the private sector reported they were heartened by the spirit of collaboration of the second gathering. The next meeting is scheduled for August.

A similar task force is being developed for the island of St. Croix and will launch in the Fall.

Feature Image: Port of St. Maarten, voted the number 1 port in the Caribbean out of 10 for three consecutive years beginning in 2015, by readers of Cruise Fever. St. Thomas was number 2.