

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Cruise Industry Experts To Virgin Islands: Innovate Or Get Left Behind

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ST. THOMAS -- As far back as the cruise industry goes, St. Thomas has been one of its most visited destinations. Charlotte Amalie, with a waterfront seemingly tailor-made for tourists, and two ports that have for years welcomed millions of visitors from around the world, has maintained thousands of tourism-related jobs.

But attractions that intrigued tourists in the 1970s, 80s, 90s and even early 2000s, no longer carry the luster they once did, and as the Virgin Islands government, administration after next, has failed to take the necessary steps in revamping the tourism product, cruise calls have diminished, with St. Thomas seeing a big drop through 2018.

Cruise industry experts, standing in front of community members and government officials at the Marriott Frenchman's Reef Resort here on Thursday night, spoke candidly about the territory's current position in the cruise line business, telling local officials that the territory needs to either innovate or go home, according to Senate President Myron Jackson, who spoke with The Consortium at length following the hourslong panel, hosted by Governor Kenneth Mapp.

Florida Cruise Association President Michelle Paige, among three cruise industry experts invited to speak last night, said that the territory ranked 29 out of 35 with cruise ship passengers who were asked how satisfied they were with the tour that they purchased. She said the territory ranked 11 out of 35 in the best Caribbean cruise destination category.

The decline is something that has been known to local leaders; in March, Department of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty revealed that [cruise calls would decline by 11 percent through 2018.](#)

"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.

"The cruise ship returning passenger has diminished considerably," Mr. Jackson told The Consortium Thursday night. "The officials said we need to diversify the visitor experience. Diamonds are nice but the turn in the 21st Century requires much more than that in terms of visitor experience."

Associate Vice President of Royal Caribbean Cruises, Federico Gonzalez-Denton, said the territory could no longer rely on attractions that were popular in the past to thrust it forward. What worked 40 years ago -- or 20 years ago -- will not be enough to entice visitors to return, or those who come to spend their dollars.

Cruise industry officials were also blunt about the territory's transportation problems, according to Mr. Jackson. They said cruise visitors have complained about the length of time it takes to navigate through downtown Charlotte Amalie and elsewhere in St. Thomas, and the problem has continued to hurt the local industry.

"Transportation is a major issue," Mr. Jackson said. The Senate president also spoke of Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter's suggestion last night of a cultural museum that would serve as a new attraction, stating that he brought the same idea before the community years ago. "I've been on that page for a long time," Mr. Jackson said.

Mr. Mapp spoke of multiple projects, including water taxi in downtown Charlotte Amalie, that his administration is in the process of developing in an effort to alleviate the traffic congestion. He also said that his new budget would include over \$700,000 to hire new Customs and Border Protection officers that would hasten clearance time for foreign cruise ships as well as flights. The governor said legislation would soon be forwarded to the Senate for dredging at the turning basin and inner harbor at Charlotte Amalie -- all in an effort to better the tourism product.

Yet, the tourism experts did not mince words in relaying the USVI's precarious situation, and how things could go downhill. According to Mr. Jackson, Mr. Gonzalez-Denton said

the new cruise lines from Carnival will be larger, and if the territory cannot prepare itself to accommodate these ships, the territory will be left behind.

Ms. Paige, when asked why the cruise ships sometimes leave the islands early, was blunt: Cruise ships will go where the money is, and currently, there are more lucrative markets not too far from St. Thomas, she said. And these competitive markets -- Tortola and St. Martin to name a few -- are investing heavily in their products, siphoning away precious cruise dollars from the U.S. Virgin Islands, whose economy needs it now more than ever.

Vice President of Strategic and Commercial Development at Carnival Cruise Line, Carlos Torres de Navarra, revealed that Carnival Cruise calls to St. Thomas dropped from 217 in 2014 to 170 this year. And while Carnival calls in St. Croix climbed from 1 in 2014 to 5 in 2016, there will be no Carnival calls in St. Croix in 2018. The experts pointed to St. Croix as an area with potential for growth, but said much work is needed to improve the visitor experience.

The results are nothing personal, cruise officials said, their decision-making depends on who's driving the most dollars.

"They said basically our product is outdated," Mr. Jackson managed. "We're still in a 1950s product and cruise ships have been updated. Our shopping experience hasn't changed and the industry has changed." Mr. Jackson said while the territory continues to be a popular destination, the experience is no longer alluring.

How can this be fixed? "Our visitor experience requires us to revisit and to revamp the destination. It's going to take all hands on deck, the government and the community alike," Mr. Jackson said.