

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Bid To Expedite Clearance At Territory's Ports, Mapp Includes \$750,000 In Budget For Additional Customs Agents

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ST. THOMAS -- Territory's chief executive revealed on Monday during a press conference here that he included \$750,000 in the fiscal year 2018 budget to pay for six more Customs and Border Protection (C.B.P.) agents to work at the territory's ports. The announcement follows a grim assessment of the USVI's cruise line sector, where experts in the cruise business spoke in blunt terms about the territory's outlook, and why cruise ships were choosing other ports instead of Charlotte Amalie -- a reality that has led to the decline of ships through 2018 in the USVI.

The funds to hire the new agents, though a small part of addressing the territory's attraction problem, will nonetheless help in critical ways, according to the governor. The territory would be able to take advantage of the one to fourteen-day cruises in the Caribbean that want to come to St. Thomas, but cannot because the length of time it takes to clear these passengers would be too lengthy, as the passengers would be coming from Caribbean ports, which are considered foreign.

"By hiring these additional agents, they will be able to fly to the foreign port the night before and clear the vessel on its way to the Virgin Islands so that the passengers can disembark once the vessel arrives," Mr. Mapp said. The governor said the service isn't new; current law under the Department of Homeland Security makes provision for the program, he said. However, the current C.B.P. personnel deployment in the territory isn't adequate to execute the plan.

Mr. Mapp said while the local government will pay for the employees, who the governor expects will be hired locally, he said the G.V.I.'s only request is that C.B.P. handles the hiring, training and background checks.

Mr. Mapp said the additional C.B.P. agents will also alleviate the long lines at the Cyrile E. King Airport, where passengers who are departing the territory are required to be at the airport four hours prior to the flight. The passengers get to the airport, stand in line and handle their baggage "longer in time and longer in distance than the very baggage handlers for the airlines," Mr. Mapp said.

The governor said all the C.B.P. offices that are in the downstairs portion of the Cyrile K. King terminal will be moved elsewhere at the airport, as the Port Authority will be leasing some high-end construction trailers to be deployed around the facility to house offices. Once this occurs, the freed offices in the downstairs portion of the airport will be reconstructed as open spaces to allow for a more seamless and faster check-in process, Mr. Mapp said.

The pending changes are paramount, the governor added, because the territory is expecting additional direct flights at both airports during the upcoming winter season.