

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Business Leaders In St. Thomas Share 'Strong, Positive' Ideas With Mapp At Meeting; Express Optimism About Territory's Recovery

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ST. THOMAS - Cruise lines are anxious to resume visits to the U.S. Virgin Islands, Governor Kenneth Mapp told members of the business community at a meeting on St. Thomas on Tuesday.

During his Tuesday press briefing at Government House on St. Croix, Mr. Mapp said the business leaders had "strong, positive suggestions," and reiterated that a similar meeting was being planned for the St. Croix District this week.

The governor said the cruise ships would like to return to St. Thomas and St. Croix as soon as October 15, while adding that he believes late-October is a more realistic target. A formal announcement from the cruise lines and the Government of the Virgin Islands is expected next week.

"This isn't easy," the governor said. "The key is to manage our emotions and figure out how we can make this an opportunity for growth."

More than 150 representatives from the private sector met with Mr. Mapp, Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty and other officials at the Government Employees' Retirement System conference room on St. Thomas.

The governor told those assembled that he was eager to hear how businesses have been managing in the aftermath of two back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes and to learn more about how the government can assist those in the private sector to get Virgin Islanders back to work, according to Government House.

While many had concerns about power restoration, the diesel supply and the removal of debris, optimism prevailed, Government House said. Most stated they were pleased with the government's response to the significant challenges created as a result of the storms. Many merchants recalled the experience of Hurricane Marilyn in 1995 and say they understand the realities of a difficult recovery process.

Several businesses that serve cruise ship passengers are prepared to welcome visitors. Pash Daswani, president of the India Association, stated that association members who own Charlotte Amalie businesses are fully operational. "Main Street, Crown Bay and Havensight are ready to open," he said.

Mrs. Nicholson-Doty said that the cruise lines have requested a status report on beaches in the U.S. Virgin Islands and other attractions, and that representatives would soon visit to assess sites in the territory so they can start scheduling cruise calls. "They don't expect perfection, but they do expect honesty," she said.

Some restaurants, shops and beaches must be fully accessible in order for ships to return and the territory must be able to assure safety, she explained. The West Indian Company Limited (WICO), which manages St. Thomas' main cruise pier, was largely undamaged by the storm, according to WICO CEO Clifford Graham. "We did lose some security fencing and lighting, but we are working diligently on repairs and to pull any debris out of the water," Graham said.

Mr. Mapp said his priorities for tourism include reopening Magens Bay, working with the federal government to reopen the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John, and providing power to the islands' business districts. While many of the major hotels expect to be closed while damages are assessed and repairs are made, both the government and business owners remain optimistic about the future.

"I was very pleased and encouraged by the large turnout today and the very positive response of the business community here," Mr. Mapp said. "We are going to continue to work together to rebuild a better Virgin Islands."