

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Letter To The Editor | Sharing A Few Observations

Opinion / **Published On November 01, 2017 12:13 PM /**

Staff **November 01, 2017**



To the Editor:

Two ideas follow.

First is the need to kick start economic activity beyond that of the construction sector.

Second is to evaluate where we are in the recovery effort and if necessary make changes to ensure we are on track as to where we should be seven weeks following Irma.

We all have a point of view. Discussing what our community needs to move forward is at its essence a point of view, regardless of the best financial or economic practices

underpinning the ideas shared.

Confronting the challenges ahead, however, requires a coming together. The blame game is counterproductive. The task ahead is to collectively move beyond why to what's next.

When only lemons are available, it is time to start making lemonade.

The individual Cuban is helping create a market economy with limited resources. In that example there is a take-away lesson for all of us. Regardless of significant limitations, there is economic opportunity. And, fortunately our situation is no way near as problematic as the Cuban experience.

The USVI's traditional visitor base is diminished and will be for some time. However, even in disaster recovery there exists an economic market for the creative and those capable of operating outside of the box. Though the breadth of that market may be temporarily limited, it does offer opportunity beyond the trades in construction and reconstruction.

There are well over 500 line workers; even more FEMA, emergency disaster workers and volunteers; military personnel and insurance adjusters now living with us in the community. Most are here without family. All are well paid.

Assuming there are 2000 emergency workers evenly divided between islands, it is the equivalent of the Buccaneer, Carambola, plus an additional 712 room being fully occupied on St. Croix and more than Frenchman's Reef, Sugar Bay, and the Ritz-Carlton being similarly occupied on St. Thomas.

These individuals require goods and services. Working all day under adverse conditions, each looks to the evening hours to unwind. Expectations are limited and realistic; entertainment, a few drinks among colleagues, collegiality and a menu of limited but well prepared meal options suffice.

Locals confronted with limited electricity and no television or Internet are similarly looking for relaxation opportunities outside of the home, which allow for mingling with neighbors and friends, and the opportunity to de-stress, swap experiences and commiserate.

There is economic opportunity in addressing these needs.

Much is made of today's sharing economy. Disaster recovery presents opportunity for those with an entrepreneurial orientation. Home and business owners require assistance beyond what family, friends and relatives can do to assist. Seemingly ordinary skills and experience can fill a need that another member of the community lacks-- from navigating government and insurance requirements to making home and property repairs to delivering goods and services.

Some have already taken advantage of this new economy. In addressing this opportunity there is likelihood that the end result might be a more extensive entrepreneurial venture.

Many residents are moving beyond the self-imposed social isolation and segregation, which existed pre Irma. Locals and emergency workers are gathering and socializing

outside the home. Entertainment in the form of live music has replaced the narcosis inducing television screen with its homogenous entertainment. There is a new wave of conviviality and a sense of community. We are all hanging together towards a desired objective. We should not allow this to die with the recovery.

A critical component of moving forward is to eliminate the curfew. That can and should happen when roads are clear and reasonable safe.

A curfew erodes economic activity and individual freedom. Imposition is to protect life and property. Its imposition is a binary event. It is either a public well-being necessity or it is not.

Many country roads nationwide are unlit. A heightened public safety presence, appropriately implemented, can keep roadways safe and protect the temporary vulnerability of property from the more callous within the community.

Clearing the roads of major obstacles and patching axle-breaking potholes should be a priority from the initial days of any recovery effort.

It is not too early to assess the trajectory of the recovery effort to date. To do so we need to evaluate the following.

How quickly were transportation nodes restored-- air service, ferry transport and land? Were seaports quickly able to accommodate recovery related traffic and the movement of supplies required by the population as well as disaster workers?

Were obstructions to vehicular movement removed such that there was safety of movement along the principal transport arteries?

How quickly were essential utility services such as electricity, Internet and telecommunications restored to the central business district and essential public facilities? Is there a shared action plan that explains how reconstruction contributes to eliminating or reducing the reoccurrence in successive disasters?

Household waste, yard and construction debris pose a challenge to personal health ocean quality, wildlife and the greater economy. Was this waste systematically cleared and appropriately disposed of?

Is basic health service restored and is there a functioning protocol for dealing with the more complicated health requirements of the community? Were essential emergency services available throughout the disaster period?

Is prioritization afforded restarting the drivers of the economy at all levels-- shopkeepers, construction industry, banks, and personal and professional services? It is far easier to retain an existing business than attract and incentivize the opening of a new one.

When obstacles exist to money circulating in the economy the result is lay offs, business closure, the inability to afford the cost of construction, loss of workers and talent, destabilization of educational institutions, loss of entertainment venues, personal depression, lack of optimism for the future, and the questioning of the community's long term economic viability.

We each have a role to play in getting our communities moving again. And, collectively, by speaking up we can make our opinions known and move others to do their part in that effort as well.

Submitted on Tuesday by: Justin Moorhead, managing director, Virgin Islands Capital Resources, Inc.

Feature Image: RT Park on St. Croix, after Hurricane Maria. (Credit: Irene Ali Photography)

© Viconsortium 2026