

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Continues To Suffer From Lack Of Activities For Cruise Passengers, Officials Say

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ST. THOMAS -- The St. Croix tourism product, especially the cruise ship sector, continues to be an unattractive stop for major cruise lines, who local V.I. Port Authority and Department of Tourism officials said have pointed to the lack of activities for their passengers as the main reason why the port calls at the Ann Abramson Pier in Frederiksted have paled in comparison to other ports, including neighboring St. Thomas.

The observations, expressed by D.O.E. Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty and V.I.P.A. Executive Director David Mapp, were relayed during a Wednesday Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture hearing at the Earl B. Ottley Legislature, on [a bill](#) sponsored by Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly that would place the Ann Abramson Pier under

the management of the West Indian Company (WICO); the goal being that WICO's experience in the cruise ship industry -- it operates the most successful port of call in the U.S. Virgin Islands -- would raise the fortunes of the St. Croix port, thereby helping the St. Croix tourism industry.

But the measure, which was ultimately held in committee, received little support from lawmakers as well as testifiers. "The concerns of the cruise lines are centered around the availability and capacity of tours within the short time frame of five hours in port, the availability of shopping and dining options close to the port, and the amount of time required for Customs and Border Protection to clear the vessel," said Mrs. Nicholson-Doty, referring to the Ann Abramson Pier. "It must be noted that none of the issues mentioned surround the operation or management of the Ann E. Abramson Marine Facility."

She added, "The critical matter remains the Virgin Islands product offering. Cruise ships call on ports that provide unique experiences, which their passengers demand, and where the shore excursions make money."

For his part, Mr. Mapp reminded the committee that while the Frederiksted port had seen little success even with a slew of incentives being thrown at the cruise lines, the Austin "Babe" Monsanto Marine Facility in St. Thomas, controlled by V.I.P.A., has been successful. He, like Mrs. Nicholson-Doty, contended that the problem was not management, but rather the lack of activities on St. Croix.

"As each political leader in the territory is aware, since 1990, V.I.P.A. has offered various incentive programs to entice more cruise calls to St. Croix," Mr. Mapp said. Some of the enticements include a complete waiver of all port fees, lower fuel costs through St. Croix bunkering operations, and 2 for 1 discounts. "All failed to produce any appreciable increase in St. Croix calls," Mr. Mapp said.

Strengthening his point, Mr. Mapp said no one travels to a destination to stay at its port. "These facilities are merely gateways into and out of our community," he said. The real issue at hand, Mr. Mapp continued, was the island's slim offerings for cruise passengers. Speaking of a influx of cruise ships that St. Croix experienced following Hurricane Maria, when many Caribbean ports were offline, Mr. Mapp said the complaints from cruise lines were familiar: "Many of these new arrivals voiced a common theme -- St. Croix needed to improve its shore excursions experience for their guests," Mr. Mapp said. "Additionally, at last week's Seatrade Global Conference, during a meeting with various cruise executives, it was also pointed out that our current transportation system for cruise passengers needs to be vastly improved. We were told modern, air-conditioned buses for transporting cruise guests are being used by our neighboring competition and the VI is expected to follow suit."

Lawmakers saw little purpose for the bill, among them Senator Tregenza Roach, who reminded that cruise ship tourism in the USVI has been experiencing erosion as competing ports become more aggressive with their own offerings. He said focus should be placed on assuring that the main tourism offering of the territory, the St. Thomas cruise ship tourism sector, be bolstered, while St. Croix should set its focus on smaller, luxury cruise lines -- as have been spoken before by a number of leaders -- that may bring a smaller number of passengers, but a higher dollar spend.

According to statistics provided by the Bureau of Economic Research (B.E.R.), cruise calls to St. Croix saw steep declines between 2015 to present. In 2015, cruise ship visitors on St. Croix totaled 159,353. Since then passengers declined to 117,138 in 2016; 32,634 in 2017 and 27,665 so far in 2018, revealed B.E.R. Senior Policy Analyst Donnie Dorsett.

In other action on Wednesday, the committee held two bills -- Bill No. 32-0096, sponsored by Neville James and Sammuel Sanes, which attempts to refine language found in the Economic Development Authority's V.I. Economic Development Program, while strengthening the consequences for breaking the rules.

The measure was held after testifies, among them E.D.A. CEO Wayne Biggs and Department of Labor Commissioner Catherine Hendry, said it produced more problems than those it intends to solve.

"The bill as written increases the potential number of residents eligible for job opportunities with E.D.C. [Economic Development Commission] beneficiaries, but opens the flood gates to non-local hiring," Ms. Hendry said. "This is contrary to the intent of the E.D.C. program. Additionally, a permanent home can easily be accomplished in a matter of days while the current definition requires a commitment of a minimum of one-year residency."

Also held was [Bill No. 32-0104](#), a measure sponsored by Mr. Sanes that seeks to authorize a feasibility study on the implementation of a composting program in the territory. It was held primarily because of the lack of funding, and because there was already strong evidence that composting would be beneficial to the USVI, according to [outgoing](#) Waste Management Authority board Chairman Harith Wickrema.

Mr. Sanes's bill was written before the September 2017 storms.

The committee did approve a measure on Wednesday, [Bill No. 32-0009](#), which seeks to correct an inadvertent error in the qualification requirements for an E.D.A. Certificate. As currently written, 29 V.I.C. §718(a) (4) penalizes an investor for making any of the 8 required investments prior to the activation of the Certificate.