

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Cruise Ships In Gallows Bay Harbor By Next Year? The Possibility Is Real

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ST. CROIX -- Luxury cruise ships, those smaller than the general vessels carrying thousands of passengers but commanding greater purchasing power, could be docking at the Gallows Bay Port -- owned and operated by the Virgin Island Port Authority (V.I.P.A.) -- by next year.

That's according to V.I.P.A. Assistant Executive Director Damian Cartwright, speaking with The Consortium following a board meeting on Wednesday, when the V.I.P.A. board was on break before it went into executive session.

Mr. Cartwright envisioned the Gallows Bay Port being a hub that could help drive dollars into the downtown Christiansted and Gallows Bay areas, lifting the fortunes of currently struggling businesses while attracting new ones. The authority has plans to completely revamp the area to facilitate such activity.

But there are a few hindrances that could delay or altogether stall the project. First, the Army Corps of Engineers (U.S.A.C.E.) must approve a permit to allow for the dredging of the Schooner Bay, as the ships will not be able to dock at the port if the dredging does not occur. Mr. Cartwright said he expected to receive the permit from U.S.A.C.E. next month.

"I can't start until I get the permit," Mr. Cartwright said. "Once I get the permit and can assure that I get the commitment in place for the rest of the funding, then I advertise for bid." Mr. Cartwright said the bidding process takes roughly thirty days. Once the companies have placed their bids, an evaluation and selection process is then employed. The final step is board approval, he said, with the entire process from advertising bids to board approval taking three months.

"Typically, when we get [board approval] and issue an NTP (a letter to the contractor stating that work can begin), really in a 9-month timeframe the project will be completed," Mr. Cartwright said. By his estimates, the Gallows Bay Port revamp should be completed in just over a year.

Yet even if the permit is approved next month, there's the issue of funding. Approximately one year ago, V.I.P.A. board [approved a \\$1.4 million contract](#) awarded to GEC, LLC — the same company awarded the Paul E. Joseph Stadium contract — to demolish and construct a new arrival building at the Gallows Bay Port. That contract does not include funding to dredge the Schooner channel. Mr. Cartwright said V.I.P.A. will need help from the Senate for the remainder of the funding, but at a time when the government's fiscal condition is the worst it's been, it remains to be seen whether funding will be provided. Mr. Cartwright, not committing to a set figure, told The Consortium that the entire project will cost "a few million [dollars]."

There's also the issue of finding contractors. Mr. Cartwright said because of the abundance of construction work not only in the territory but in Puerto Rico as well, contractors are hard to find. And even when you are able to find them, he said, their prices have appreciated because of high demand.

Finally, in order for the Gallows Bay Port to become a true hub for high-end cruise ships, the cargo operation currently at the port must be moved to the Gordon A. Finch Molasses Pier on the south shore of St. Croix, to the west of the Limetree Bay facility. Mr. Cartwright said V.I.P.A. has been performing major improvements to the south shore facility to move the cargo operations there. However, the authority, he said, has lost confidence in the current contractor's ability to do the job. This poses a problem, he added, as it might force the authority to look elsewhere, which would delay progress. (The contractor, out of Puerto Rico, has been struggling with getting a business license, Mr. Cartwright said, adding that while the firm was not forthcoming with its issues, it might be related to Hurricane Maria's effects on Puerto Rico, which he said might be impeding the company's ability to move forward.)

While the aforementioned could potentially delay the development of the Gallows Bay Port as an attractive port of call for luxury cruise lines, Mr. Cartwright was optimistic that the work would eventually start and be completed. He spoke of private sector partnerships as a conduit for expansion and growth of the area, stating that once the cargo operation is moved, the properties surrounding the port will become prime real estate, essentially creating a new market.

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