

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Ross University, A Major Economic Driver In Dominica For 40 Years, Relocates To Barbados

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Ross University, which had operated in Dominica since 1978 and served as a major source of economic activity said to be producing a staggering 30 percent of the island's gross domestic product, has decided to leave the island and move its operations to Barbados. The announcement, which was made on Friday, represents a major blow to the struggling Nature Island, as Dominica is called, which was laid to waste by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

The announcement was made by long-serving Dominica Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerit, who attributed Ross's shuttering on the island to Tropical Storm Erika, which [battered Dominica in August 2015](#), and Hurricane Maria, which arguably exacted most of its

destruction to Dominica.

In his opening remarks while addressing the country on the medical university's departure, Mr. Skerrit said he wanted to give Dominicans "a heads up," a cavalier remark that did not consider the weight of the event.

"I wanted this morning to give the country a heads up that anytime from now Ross University will announce its departure from Dominica," Mr. Skerrit said. "As we all know this has been speculated for some time, but a few days ago officials from Ross formerly gave word to us on this matter."

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Mr. Skerrit said his government had been communicating with Ross University officials since Hurricane Maria struck the island, to help "cushion" the loss of the medical school. He said over the last ten months his government explored "all options that one could think of," however, he added, "at the end of the day the officials of Ross, like any other business person, reserve and exercise the right of the shareholders and the many interests to include but not limited to parents, students, faculty and sponsors."

The prime minister added that Ross's closure in Dominica was a direct consequence of Tropical Storm Erika and Hurricane Maria. "Had it not been for these two storms, there would never have been any consideration of Ross University's departure from Dominica," Mr. Skerrit said. He said it was only three years ago that Ross and the Dominican government renewed a 25-year agreement, which he said came with a wide range of concessions that included the redevelopment of the campus.

"But none of us can wish away these weather systems; the fact remains they happened, Erika and Maria, which brought considerable damage to Dominica," Mr. Skerrit said. He said he was satisfied that Ross had "certainly" tried "everything."

The prime minister's demeanor failed to convey the magnitude of the announcement, as he gave off smiles during his talk that came with an air of nonchalance. And while he spoke of Ross's efforts to keep their operations in Dominica, the prime minister never spoke of his government's attempts via means of incentives, if any, that were utilized to persuade the university to stay. Instead, Mr. Skerrit said discussions would continue with the parent company of Ross "to see how Dominica can position itself to attract such operations in the near future."

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Following Hurricane Maria, Ross had been temporarily operating in St. Kitts and Tennessee, and there was speculation as to whether the university would resume operations in Dominica -- where it had been responsible for helping sustain the island's fragile economy.

Ross was founded 40 years ago as The University of Dominica School of Medicine by entrepreneur Robert Ross. Its location on the island for most of its existence was in Picard, Portsmouth, where a thriving commerce environment was built around its operations -- everything from taxis, rental properties, hotels and other businesses. These operations depended solely on Ross to survive, and whether they will be able to sustain

in light of the school's departure remains an open question. Mr. Skerrit spoke of working with Ross to help the affected businesses "reposition themselves," however he did not give specifics. The prime minister said his government would meet with the affected individuals to discuss the future, "and we shall be able to share with them the plans for them specifically and the country in general," he said.

Mr. Skerrit, attempting to give perspective, recalled the aftermath of Tropical Erika, reminding Dominicans that Colgate-Palmolive halted its operations on the island. But the factory, called Dominica Coconut Products (D.C.P.), reopened in less than two years, the prime minister said as he sought to ignite hope in a people shocked by Ross's departure, many of whom relied on it in some form.

"In the years to come we will see the increase of the line of products that this D.C.P. will be providing, and so D.C.P. will be in the next few years in a better position than D.C.P. Colgate-Palmolive was in terms of its contributions to Dominica," Mr. Skerrit said. "So let us remain optimistic; this is a natural way of life. This is about business, this is about the impact of Hurricane Maria on Dominica."

Mr. Skerrit said his government harbored no animosity towards the university, although he would have preferred that it stayed. "We have to be pragmatic and and practical, and we remain supportive of Ross's effort," the prime minister said.

A few hours after Mr. Skerrit's announcement, Ross University CEO Lisa Wardell announced in Barbados at a joint press conference that the university had arrived to an agreement with the government of Barbados, with the academic center of the school being placed in Bridgetown, Barbados, and student housing in the Parish of Christ Church. School is expect to commence in January, 2019.

Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley hailed the agreement as a statement of confidence in her government, and that "it points with what we've been trying to do and what we've said we wanted to do from day one with respect to our manifesto. We believe our country can be a hub for education and for medical services."