

The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Face Of Cruise Ship Decline, WICO Submits Permit For Additional Dredging To Accommodate Larger Vessels

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ST. THOMAS -- Seeking to accommodate the berthing of newer, Oasis-size ships at its dock, the West Indian Company (W.I.C.O.) on Tuesday announced that it has partnered with the Virgin Islands Port Authority for the submission of joint applications to the Department of Planning and Natural Resources and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to dredge along W.I.C.O.'s dock, the main channel and the turn basin.

That's according to W.I.C.O head Clifford Graham, speaking during the autonomous entity's budget hearing in the Committee on Finance at the Capitol Building. The

announcement comes in the face of a drastic decline in cruise calls to Charlotte Amalie, as other Caribbean islands have increased their competitiveness and made their ports more attractive, while the territory has lagged behind. In July of 2017, experts warned local government officials and stakeholders [that the USVI would get left behind](#) in the cruise business if the territory failed to innovate.

According to Mr. Graham, the application was submitted on June 1, 2018. If the permits are granted, the dredging operation to remove 290,000 cubic yards of material would commence, Mr. Graham said. He said 250,000 cubic yards would be removed from the channel and turn basin, and 40,000 from W.I.C.O.'s berth area.

"The cost of this dredging was made possible by the commitment from the Honorable Governor Kenneth E. Mapp to utilize \$23 million of the \$243 million funding in the first tranche of funding under the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery Funds," Mr. Graham said.

Along with the dredging initiative, Mr. Graham said W.I.C.O. has been exploring ways to enhance its tourism product through the addition of "exciting new" shore excursion options on island. The government-owned entity is also exploring what Mr. Graham described as "creative development strategies" for W.I.C.O.'s vacant 7-acre parcel southeast of the cruise ship dock. And it has been examining the feasibility of expanding St. Thomas's cruise market in a sustainable way to keep up with the pace of the growing cruise market.

"To meet the challenging demands of cruisers, especially repeated cruisers, the territory must address ways to enhance the on-shore experience of our cruise passengers," Mr. Graham said. "W.I.C.O. recognizes that in order for the territory to remain as one of the strongest destination in the Eastern Caribbean, all hands must be on deck to add exciting new shore excursions."

"Accordingly," he added, "W.I.C.O., in collaboration with other public and private entities, has begun the process of creating an avenue in which new development concepts can be developed to reignite our shore excursion excitement." Mr. Graham said while the initiatives were not ready to be disclosed, "WICO is well aware that our role in the economic enhancement of the territory tourism market does not stop at our boundaries, but rather extends well beyond it."

During the Department of Tourism's [budget hearing Monday](#), Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty made known that the U.S.V.I.'s cruise industry, in decline before the 2017 storms struck the territory, continued to struggle.

"We were already witnessing a decline in this segment which was compounded by losing all calls in September and October and a few lines not returning until January 2018," she said. "Further, we were challenged by a number of lines re-positioning their Eastern Caribbean itineraries for Western Caribbean itineraries shortly after the storms."

According to Mrs. Nicholson-Doty, St. Thomas received a total of 718,275 passengers through July 2018 compared to 929,056 passengers arriving during the same period in 2017. St. Croix has realized an increase with 48,836 passengers through May 2018 versus 24,742 passengers during all of 2017. There are two scheduled calls remaining in

FY 2018 for St. Croix in September, she said.

Feature Image: Three cruise ships dock at WICO. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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