

The Virgin Islands Consortium

6 Senators Head To Seatrade, A Costly, Taxpayer-Funded Trip To Miami

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Six senators are headed to Seatrade this week, the multi-day annual Cruise Global Conference being held in Miami, Florida this year, Senate President Kenneth Gittens has confirmed to The Consortium. Seatrade is the world's largest gathering of who's who in the cruise industry, and brings together cruise line executives, media, speakers, port representatives, ship builders and vendors to discuss most aspects of cruising.

At least three senators headed the conference this year have attended in the past with little to show for it. Senators Kurt Viale and Myron Jackson, along with Mr. Gittens, have all made the annual, costly trip in prior years. None of the senators provided press releases to notify of the public of their attendance; Mr. Gittens told The Consortium he

intended to issue a release after his arrival in Miami and after getting a sense of possible inroads he and other lawmakers intend to make.

"We have to continue to grow the industry so we wanted to make sure we are at the table with the opportunity to meet the [cruise line] executives one-on-one," Mr. Gittens told The Consortium. Mr. Gittens recalled learning at Seatrade in 2016 that cruise lines would not send additional ships to St. Croix that year. He then made a plea at the conference requesting that cruise ships that were diverted from their original port of call for reasons such as bad weather, be sent to St. Croix. "We had several of them that year and even into 2017 before the hurricanes," the senator said. "We're also looking at trends... those are my reasons for wanting us to go and be at the table."

The six senators attending are Mr. Gittens, Mr. Violet, Mr. Jackson, Athneil Thomas, Oakland Benta and Steven Payne.

The conference is annually attended by the Virgin Islands Port Authority and the West Indian Company, both with critical interests because they run the territory's ports where the cruise lines call. The Department of Tourism, responsible for sustaining and growing the territory's tourism product, attend annually. V.I.P.A., WICO and D.O.T. use the information gathered at the event to help shape their strategies for the year and beyond, and rarely share such information publicly. They also use the opportunity to feverishly promote the territory — their presentations include dances, music and other attractive strategies. [\[Watch: USVI's Caribbean Dancers Perform At Seatrade 2018\]](#).

Also attending is Governor Bryan and members of his cabinet. Mr. Bryan told The Consortium last week that he would leave the event Monday for Washington, D.C.

WICO, the Department of Tourism, the Virgin Islands Port Authority and even members of Mr. Bryan's team are to furnish reports of their attendance to local lawmakers if requested, which should inhibit the need for multiple senators -- especially at the territory's current financial juncture -- to attend.

Seatrade in recent years has become a risk for local senators to attend, as many Virgin Islanders have come to see the trip as a waste of taxpayer funds. In 2017, [only four senators attended](#) after being berated by residents the year before when [9 lawmakers made the trip](#). In 2018, 11 senators went to Seatrade, sparking a backlash from residents and a [strongly-worded Editorial](#) from The Consortium condemning the trip as a boondoggle.

Seatrade is not a cheap affair, either. Early registration for the event, which takes place annually in March, varies, but the price typically ranges above \$1,000 per individual. For example, [an article](#) on PRN News Wire last year promoting the event showed "super early bird" tickets for \$1,599 providing VIP All Access; \$1,099 for an individual to attend the full conference; and between \$799-\$999 per individual for groups. Early bird prices, often offered to entice registration, usually go up as the event gets closer. And then there's the cost of travel, hotel stay, dining and transportation among other costs, that are associated with attending such events. Senators rarely travel alone to Seatrade, as they are usually accompanied by one or more aides.