

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Carambola Plans To Partner With Local Farmers For Food; Employing Locals Will Be Top Priority Under New Owners

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ST. CROIX – Carambola’s sale from the Government Employees' Retirement System (G.E.R.S.) to Davis Bay, LLC is set to be completed by the end of this month. When the Economic Development Authority’s (E.D.A.) board met a week ago to discuss the sale of the resort, Davis Bay representatives expressed a desire to partner with local farmers to source their food and beverage division. The company felt strongly that it was uniquely positioned to collaborate with the local agricultural community, and stated that it would like to work closely with board member, former senator and current Dept. of Agriculture Commissioner Designee, Positive Nelson, to ensure that this venture is successful. Davis

Bay's biggest concern was whether the agricultural community could provide a consistent supply of produce in the long-term.

Mr. Nelson asked Davis Bay representatives what the Virgin Islands government needed to do, in terms of infrastructure, to help them be more successful. Attorney Tom Bolt, Carambola's legal representative, explained to Mr. Nelson that he was best suited as commissioner of agriculture to help.

"What people that are coming to St. Croix want is a crucian experience. They don't want to eat Häagen-Dazs ice cream, they want Armstrong ice cream. They want to have the various flavors that we have. They want mangoes that are from St. Croix. They want to eat our beef that we produce in St. Croix," Mr. Bolt said. "The problem that we have had is in agriculture with regard to being able to have consistent, reliable source of product. I can say that, not just necessarily with my experience with Carambola, but as the attorney for the Virgin Islands Hotel and Tourism Association."

He added, "We need to be working hand-in-glove with Terrence "Positive" Nelson as commissioner of agriculture to make sure that these things happen and that we can deliver, because as I said, what the tourists want to have is a Crucian experience. We cannot have a product like lettuce today but we don't have it for another month. We have to have that consistent supply. We need to develop that. I think that's squarely with the commissioner of agriculture."

Regarding employment at the resort, Rick Carrington, the current operating manager will retain the position. While Carambola had to cut staff by 70 percent, it plans to offer re-employment to all of previous rank-in-file employees (90 percent of the management team and 100 percent of the staff is local). As milestones are achieved, the level of employment will increase to 100 and during high season that number is expected to increase.

Specific milestones include [two phases that require completion](#). Phase one involves repairs to get the resort ready before high season, which runs from mid-December to mid-April, and phase two involves working with Renaissance to rebrand the resort (phase one must be completed before the rebranding effort). Until then the resort will continue to operate as Carambola. The expected completion date for phase two is June of 2020. At that time, the "Renaissance" brand will be used again.

G.E.R.S. administrator Austin Nibbs, asked what the resort's plans were to bring employees who were earning below minimum wage up to par. Mr. Carrington explained that in coordination with legislation passed by the Senate approximately a year ago, the resort brought up its minimum wage to \$10.50 per hour, including housekeeping, and the only employees below the minimum wage bracket were "tipped" employees like waitresses and waiters, because they receive gratuity.

One board member inquired about what the common practice in the welfare-to-work program had been, considering the fact that it was stipulated in the benefits that Carambola agreed to hire at least two individuals. Mr. Carrington explained that the resort had engaged it without much success.

“My experience is that a lot of Economic Development Companies (E.D.C.s) are not coming forward to utilize and take advantage of the benefits that we provide at the hotel. For example, I have a surplus of contributions for the tourism and hospitality scholarship programs from last year. Organizations have not come forward looking for these benefits. It is an opportunity for us to educate the public more about the benefits we offer to the community,” he imparted. He continued to share that because individuals were not coming forward, he had to redistribute some of the funding by donating uniforms to Little League West’s athletic program just to expend some of the funds as an investment to the territory’s youth and the community.

Mr. Nibbs asked Davis Bay executives to discuss scholarship programs that they plan to implement in St. Croix. Mr. Gordon said he was aware that it was a condition of the E.D.C. program and that they continue the same way the current owners have been managing the program.

Mr. Carrington explained further, “We have an internship program. We work with the Educational Complex’s culinary program. We also employ college students returning to the territory who are in the hospitality industry, so they can gain experience while earning money.”

He told the board that in regard to scholarships that Carambola was seeking more involvement in terms of apprenticeship in housekeeping and upper management. “It is challenging to get young individuals interested in the industry,” he said. Mr. Carrington said Carambola personnel visit schools and conduct career fairs hosted at the University of the Virgin Islands to promote the opportunity, but it is dependent on a strong curriculum to generate student interest and help them understand the benefit they can garner from the industry. Carambola also participates in the U.V.I. Cell program.

The [E.D.A. plays a major role](#) in the territory’s economic development and describes itself as a government vehicle that promotes economic growth, job creation, and wealth generation in the U.S. Virgin Islands. It aims to accomplish this mission by attracting investors to establish or relocate their businesses to the territory. The E.D.A. also provides financial assistance for new and existing small to medium-sized businesses and assists V.I. residents and business owners alike with rehabilitating their properties located in distressed areas that were once vibrant economic centers of activity.

Correction: May 23, 2019

A previous version of this article stated that Tom Bolt represents Davis Bay, LLC. However, Mr. Bolt represents Carambola. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.