

logo not found or type unknown

WICO is at 'Sink or Swim' Time of its Existence, Says Board Member; CDC's 'Framework of Conditional Sailing' Further Delays Cruise Travel

Tourism / **Published On December 03, 2020 04:49 AM /**

Maxiene K. Cabo **December 03, 2020**

Image not found or type unknown



Closeup of cruise ship docked in port. By. GETTY IMAGES

The West Indian Company Ltd. (WICO) Board of Directors convened on Wednesday to discuss several items involving the WICO dock, with matters surrounding possible delays of cruise travel, along with WICO's survival, being matters most pressing to board members.

During WICO's board meeting in October, Mr. Ottley told those in attendance that the Virgin Islands could see the return of cruise ships to WICO [as early as January 2021](#). At that time, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had extended its no-sail order to the end of October. Since then, the CDC has lifted the no-sail order and replaced it with the "Framework for

Conditional Sailing Order". This order presents a phased approach for the resumption of passenger cruises.

According to Mr. Ottley, those phases include crew certification for negative Covid-19 infection, onboard testing capability, medical staffing, isolation areas for infected persons, and simulated (mock) voyages with volunteer passengers that must show the ability to be accomplished without a Covid outbreak. However, according to the CDC's website, the phases are subject to change based on public health considerations and cruise ship operators' ability to mitigate Covid-19 risk.

Implanted in the CDC's conditions is the requirement to establish agreements with destinations to assist with the evacuation of Covid-infected passengers, said Mr. Ottley. "The requirements sent out by CDC have generated further delays to the resumption of regular cruising. The requirement for destinations to assist onshore with evacuations of infected cases is of most concern," he said.

Mr. Ottley explained that since off-shore capacity is limited along with airlifting off-island, the necessities requested by the CDC would need to be extensively researched and further discussed since failure to meet those conditions can result in negative ship traffic. He said WICO is reaching out to the cruise lines and agents for clarity as to the schedule. Carnival Cruise Line, the largest cruise ship operator in the business, has announced a further delay to cruise travel up to Jan. 31, 2021, stated Mr. Ottley, but the remaining lines such as Norwegian Cruise Line, Disney Cruise Line, and MSC Cruises have yet to announce their intentions.

Even though the CDC has lifted the no-sail order, the cruise industry continues to lose billions of dollars due to the pandemic. Mr. Ottley stated that it would cost the industry millions more to meet the new cruise industry and CDC mandatory health and safety protocols. Moreover, moving forward ships will be deployed with a limited capacity, with the intention of providing enough space for physical distancing, along with a certain percentage of staterooms reserved for quarantine if necessary, he said.

While both cruise lines and cruisers are enthusiastic to begin sailing, there are concerns that surround health and safety on the vessels amongst first-time passengers, even though as much as 80 percent of regular cruisers have shown high interest to resume cruising, according to Mr. Ottley.

And even as the USVI continues to be a mainstay destination, Mr. Ottley said cruise lines are building itineraries based on several other factors now. "Initially, cruising will be less about where passengers want to go and more about where ships can afford to go safely," he said, adding, "with the current testing of potential vaccines, the industry's successful restart, particularly in the Caribbean, could help speed up the return to normalize cruising."

Mr. Ottley stated that WICO's cruise partners were consulting with the CDC and will provide their official health and safety protocols once they are finalized.

WICO, along with the V.I. Port Authority, the Department of Health, the Department of Tourism, and the Office of the Governor have started the process of developing the preliminary marine protocols in consultation with the CDC, said the interim CEO.

As the floor opened up for questions on Mr. Ottley's report, board member Pash Daswani inquired on the last time WICO met with the cruise lines. Mr. Ottley stated that he had the opportunity to meet with Carnival, Disney, and Norwegian around Nov. 15.

He indicated that while the meeting was productive, he realized for the most part they were keeping details "close to their chest," stating that there was some information provided in the meeting which is not available to the public. However, "the overall message that came from the cruise lines is they have started, for the most part retrofitting their ships," said Mr. Ottley, adding that one of the lines had already started the air conditioning and retrofitting up to hospital-grade filtering.

Mr. Ottley explained that the cruise lines are still a bit in the dark about what the CDC will ultimately require from them. "They have started the process, but they are not too far along with the conversations," he said. According to Mr. Ottley, even though cruise lines have submitted to the CDC their recommendations, the dialogue only began at the beginning of November.

Other questions arose from members on whether cruise lines would utilize their largest vessels to ensure social distancing, require vaccines to be taken by cruise-goers, or if they will favor Europe or the Caribbean when sailing commences.

Even so, members of the board agreed that WICO could not continue to be idle while the cruise industry tries to decide how to resume sailing. "We need to be proactive..." said Jason Charles, vice-chairman of the WICO Board of Directors. "We're in a pivotal area in WICO history where we have to sink or swim... we definitely have to be more creative and think outside the box."

"For eight months, we have not only been stagnant but declining, and there is no doubt in my mind that we need to diversify," said Roosevelt David, WICO board secretary.

Mr. Daswani indicated to the board that from his understanding, islands such as St. Maarten have already collaborated with their health department to implement PRC testing at their docks. St. Maarten in particular has also put up extra fencing around its port to assure protection, he said. "The other islands are already taking their necessary steps to get forward, and they have gone to the cruise ships and given them this plan," said Mr. Daswani. "If we wait for the cruise ships, I think we are going to be too late."

Alluding to their last board meeting, Edward Thomas, a member of the board, said, "I can't honestly say I feel confident we have done a lot since Oct. 15." During the last meeting, Mr. Thomas made a motion to officially reopen WICO's port effective Dec. 1, 2020. In an email he sent to his colleagues, Mr. Thomas indicated that they should look at WICO as more than just a cruise ship port. "Why can't we just open the port for everybody? We're spending a lot of time talking about cruise passengers; why can't we just say the port is open publicly?" inquired Mr. Thomas. "There is a lot of traffic moving through the Caribbean; if we don't go out and tell people we are available, everybody is going to pass us by."

Mr. Ottley told Mr. Thomas that WICO's marketing team has started developing a plan for the reopening, however during a meeting with WICO, Tourism, VIPA, and DOH, the initial Dec. 1 date was not acceptable because of concerns, including what would be required if the port was to reopen, and uncertainty due to testing requirements.

Ultimately, Mr. Ottley said the four agencies decided to work together to reopen the dock, though the Dec. 1 date was abandoned. He said the four did not want a situation where WICO is open, and VIPA wasn't on board or vice versa.

