The Virgin Islands Consortium

Department of Tourism Sees Benefits of Digital Advertising During Pandemic, But Senators Protest Lack of Tangible Data

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Three American Airline jets at the Cyril E. King Airport on Feb. 2, 2021. The USVI has seen strong travel demand during the pandemic, say tourism officials. **By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM**

Department of Tourism (D.O.T) Commissioner Joseph Boschulte testified before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Tuesday relative to how the Virgin Islands adjusted its marketing approach during the pandemic to help with air travel, hotel occupancy and shared economy rentals.

Mr. Boschulte spoke of statistics that he said show the territory's tourism product as performing relatively well compared to the wider Caribbean. He said in contrast to all Caribbean destinations, the USVI had the highest occupancy rate for the month of December at 59.2 percent. The regional rate was 26.5 percent for the same time period, he said. The territory also leads the region year-to-date in occupancy with a rate of 47.2 percent, compared to the region’s year-to-date occupancy rate of 30.2 percent, according to the commissioner.

“We also received the World Travel and Tourism Stamp which will pay dividends as we continue to showcase the territory as a safe and healthy destination," said Mr. Boschulte. "This specially designed stamp allows travelers to recognize governments and companies around the world which have adapted health and hygiene golden standardized protocols."

One advantage of the travel portal that requires travelers to post a negative Covid-19 or positive antibody test before travel, is that it allows D.O.T. to see exactly where tourists are coming from, explained Alani Henneman-Todman, assistant D.O.T. commissioner. This allows the department to better target online advertisements to reach customers where the territory sees most of its customers. Usually this information is provided by airlines but the portal gives the Virgin Islands direct access to the data, D.O.T. said.

Even amid the pandemic, the demand for travel to the Virgin Islands is high and airlines are adding more flights, according to department officials. Frontier Airlines will begin service later this month from Orlando and Miami to St. Thomas; JetBlue added flights from New York late last year; and private Jet arrivals are also up, according to Mr. Boschulte.

D.O.T. credited this growth to its online marketing campaigns. According to Mr. Boschulte, an investment of $300,000 delivered 9.5 million impressions and 15,000 clicks in Conde Nast Traveler Magazine; a $380,000 investment resulted in 15.2 million impressions on Refinery 29, and on Pandora, 19.5 million impressions were realized with a spend of approximately $200,000.

While the department kept a positive tone during the presentation, there were issues that senators brought up during their questioning round.

Asked by Senator Alma Francis Heyliger how these numbers relate to money being spent in the territory, Donnie Dosett, senior policy analyst for the Bureau of Economic Research, said, “We’ve seen an uptick in air visitor arrivals and guests reservations to the accommodation establishments.”

Senator Novelle Francis was also frustrated that D.O.T., he contended, provided impressions and the spend thereof, but came with little to show on how these numbers translated to real economic activity in the territory. “I think it’s critical when you come to this Committee on Economic Development, I would prefer to hear dollars and cents,” he said.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory sought an explanation on why there was no buyer for the Mahogany Run Golf Course. She said a golf course is an amenity potential tourists look for when planning vacations. Mr. Boschulte spoke of a serious bidder for the property, however he said has not been involved with negotiations.

Lawmakers also expressed concerns with the current mooring statute of the territory, and Senator Kenneth Gittens has drafted legislation to address the matter. Under current statute, boaters coming into the territory have up to fourteen days before they are required to check in with law enforcement, said Mr. Gittens. This causes a lot of issues, including the loss of revenue as boaters who check in are charged a $250 fee. Mr. Gittens said the bill would require boaters to check in immediately, and it would also seek to put the fee toward the Government Employees' Retirement system, the government's ailing pension program that is projected to collapse by the end of 2023.

Mr. Boschulte said the marine industry has been a focus of D.O.T. since the beginning of the pandemic due to the absence of cruise ships. He said the USVI is trying to strengthen its marine tourism options to tap into the booming yachting sector.

Asked by Senator Milton Potter when he realistically expects to see cruise ships return to the USVI, Mr. Boschulte said July would be the earliest. He said while cruise ships may be allowed to travel in May under current CDC guidelines, they must provide a 60-day cruise window to show they have successfully implemented all of the CDC's requirements.

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