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Op-ED: Hotel and Tourism Association Calls on Community to Commit to Reviving Tourism

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The Virgin Islands “is poised to rebound from this pandemic stronger than any of our neighbors in this region,” Gov. Albert Bryan said in his State of the Territory address. The Hotel & Tourism Association enthusiastically agrees, but knows there is work to be done immediately — and dollars to be invested now — if we are to rebuild our tourism industry and meet this lofty prediction.

The lockdowns in 2020 took an incalculable toll on tourism. Instantly, borders closed, flights canceled, cruise ships stopped cruising (not one call since mid-March) and hotel rooms went dark. Scores of residents lost their jobs affecting their ability to feed their families and to pay rent and other obligations.

Travel to our islands has fallen by more than 60 percent, affecting hotels, attractions and the businesses that support them. Tourism is our largest industry, so the impact has decimated our tax base, public works, local businesses, investment opportunities and the services and functions on which we all rely.

In 2017, there were 4,500 traditional hotel rooms in the USVI. Currently there are 2,450 – a decline of 45 percent. The passage of the Hotel Development Act several years ago has increased financial resources to fund new hotel construction and redevelopment. The act is a clear way to ensure we are making the best use of taxable resources to support the territory's most important industry. We welcome the news that both Divi Carina Bay Resort and Carambola Beach Resort are expected to reopen in 2021, and that proposals for the redevelopment of Protestant Cay are being evaluated. We are encouraged that Caneel Bay Resort is moving toward a solution that will allow it to reopen, being both the largest employer and economic driver on St. John. The territory needs the marketing power and economic contribution of the Marriott at Frenchman's Reef. We need to see Sugar Bay and its 297 rooms reconstructed and reopened. The entire tourism industry, not just the hotels themselves, depends on rooms filled with guests.

Gov. Bryan acknowledged that “the private sector is struggling with its recovery” and that he will “continue to bring them along as partners in our territorial recovery.” Let us get to work now on initiatives that will promote a rapid and sustainable recovery and allow the territory to achieve its economic potential. Vision 2040, rolled out by Gov. Bryan last October, is a community-driven economic development planning process for the economic growth and prosperity of the territory for the next 20 years. Our elected officials, community leaders and the entire business community must actively participate in this process.

And tourism must be a critical piece of the vision and planning process.

Submitted Monday by: *Lisa Hamilton, president of the USVI Hotel & Tourism Association, on behalf of the association's board of directors.*