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Port Authority Presses on With Projects: Ribbon-Cutting Event for New Cruz Bay Customs Building Hailed as Progress

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Collage of pictures of Thursday's ribbon cutting event for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection terminal in Cruz Bay. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM

The Virgin Islands Port Authority on Thursday held a ribbon cutting ceremony for the new U.S. Customs and Border Protection terminal in Cruz Bay, a facility that will provide clearance for all foreign yachts, ferries and private vessels entering the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The \$1.9 million facility — speaking to the testament of V.I.P.A. Director Carlton Dowe's prowess in [getting work done](#) — is built from solid concrete and replaces the modular trailer that was destroyed by Hurricane Irma in 2017. The sturdier facility should help St. John resume

critical marine operations faster in the event of another storm.

The facility's importance was explained by Todd Bellew, area port director for C.B.P. "This Cruz Bay customs house will enhance our ability to process private charter vessels and ferry vessels and support many functions to carry out the C.B.P. mission of protecting the people of this community, securing our borders, combating trans-national crime and facilitating lawful trade and travel."

Senator-At-Large Steven Payne also spoke of the importance of the new facility. "The U.S. Virgin Islands is a trade and travel magnet here in the Caribbean, but from a distance it may also appear to be an attractive target to commit crimes such as drug and gun trafficking, duty evasion, smuggling of contraband and other illegal activities which may threaten our borders." He said the C.B.P.'s job is to prevent this from happening in the USVI. To the employees of C.B.P., Mr. Payne said, "May this building be a symbol of your rock solid dedication to protect our beloved territory."

Leona Smith, VIPA Board of Governors chair, said the Cruz Bay Terminal serves as the first point of contact with the territory for many vessels. "The services provided are essential to the sustainability of the economy of St. John," she said.

Governor Albert Bryan complemented Mr. Bellew for attracting Virgin Islanders to work at C.B.P. "While those people work for the federal government, they are Virgin Islanders first so they do not what is only good for their agency, they do what is good for the Virgin Islands too," Mr. Bryan said.

Since 2017 Customs and Border Protection has been working out of a temporary trailer, according to V.I.P.A. Public Relations Offices and Mistress of Ceremonies, Monifa Brathwaite.

Damian Cartwright, V.I.P.A. assistant executive director and director of engineering, opened his remarks by stating, "While this building may not win any architectural awards for aesthetics, it will survive the test of time." He explained that it is a full concrete building, including a roof "designed to survive the next Category 5 hurricane and beyond, which we all know is inevitable given our geographic location."

Mr. Dowe spoke on how partnerships play a big part in the completion of Port Authority's projects. "The Port Authority could never do these projects alone," the executive director said as he thanked employees and others who assist. Some of the partnerships Mr. Dowe recognized include Transportation Security Administration, C.B.P., the Bryan administration, Congressman Stacey Plaskett's role in securing federal dollars and local lawmakers for appropriating local funds. All the speakers recognized Mr. Dowe's impact on making this project a reality.

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett stated, "I've worked in support of the V.I.P.A. applications for high priority infrastructure projects to transform our gateway port infrastructure into modern disaster resilient facilities essential to economic revitalization in the territories."

She later added, "As we all know, our tourism sector — a vital component of our economy — has been severely tried in recent years. While enhancing our larger marine ports for the return of cruise ships is very important, it is equally important to improve the quality of our smaller port entries like right here in Cruz Bay."

According to Mr. Cartwright, the new facility has 16 percent more square footage, a total 3,000 square feet, and the expanded footprint creates "faster processing times, enhanced screening

capabilities and increased passenger queuing area.” He said that the insurance company only valued the previous structure at \$200,000, leaving V.I.P.A. to foot the remaining \$1.7 million bill. The authority used funds beyond the insurance payouts to complete the new and vastly improved building.

Mr. Bryan stated, "Together we are building the Virgin Islands back, brick by brick to be better than it was before." However, he said progress can be a painful process. “Everybody love new car smell but people hate new car payment. We have to invest, we have to understand the facilities that we are building back and the progress we are seeing since the onset of Covid. It's going to cost us money too.”

Ms. Smith is a former Customs and Border Protection employee who worked at the old facility for 16 years. She said the new facility will improve working conditions for C.B.P. employees compared to the last one. Prior to the storms, Ms. Smith said there was a dire need for modernization and said she was proud to be part of an agency that has provided her C.B.P. family with an upgraded terminal.

Many of the speakers shared remarks on how the ribbon cutting symbolized positive progress in the Virgin Islands. Mr. Payne said, “In a midst of a global pandemic, whenever there is an opportunity to celebrate life, celebrate an event, or celebrate progress it should be done.”

Ms. Plaskett said, “On days like today we are making progress.”

Senator Marvin Blyden spoke on behalf of Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory. “Today is a proud day because we have taken another step in the recovery process,” he said. "Today clearly highlights the commitment shown by the Port Authority leadership to move forward and come up with solutions.”

All speakers were extremely thankful for all parties involved in making the opening of the new and improved customs facility a reality.