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Ground Breaks on \$26.8 Million Phase One of the Cyril E. King Airport's Expansion and Modernization Project as 'Dowe Now' Pushes Ahead

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Local dignitaries, among them Governor Albert Bryan, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, and Port Authority Exec. Dir. Carlton Dowe break ground on the CEKA Terminal Expansion & Modernization Project. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — The scene at the Cyril E. King Airport these days is always hectic. On Wednesday, 3,000 passengers and roughly 20 jets were expected to pass through the airport, according to V.I. Port Authority officials, as a high volume of tourists continue to visit the USVI while other passengers head to the British Virgin Islands.

The congestion has become more pronounced with the start of construction of the airport's new Terminal Expansion and Modernization, as the area once used for parking and car rentals has been barricaded to facilitate the project's first phase — a \$26.8 million parking garage and transportation center envisioned by V.I.P.A. Executive Director Carlton Dowe many years ago.

On Wednesday morning, Port Authority employees were out early making final preparations inside the barricaded area, and about 8:30 a.m., local dignitaries started making their way to the tent for yet another groundbreaking ceremony for a Port Authority project.

Yesterday's event marked Mr. Dowe's seventh since being [rehired by V.I.P.A. in June 2019](#), living up to his 'Dowe Now' moniker coined by people who know the executive as someone who gets the job done. Projects so far include the [Gallows Bay Marine Facility](#); a [\\$24 million project](#) whose completion will see all cargo operations move from Gallows Bay to the Molasses Pier; completion of V.I.P.A.'s [new maintenance building](#) in St. Thomas; [Standard Aviation's new hangar](#) that proponents have praised as a major development that will grow the territory's tourism sector; the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport's [Terminal Expansion and Modernization Project](#); and Wednesday's CEKA groundbreaking.

The \$26.8 million project — the first stage of a four-level parking garage and transportation center — was funded through a \$20 million grant from the U.S. Dept. of Commerce-Economic Development Administration in 2019, with V.I.P.A. matching \$6.8 million. The effort is part of a six-year modernization vision whose total cost is \$250 million.

Phases two through four will see the redesign, expansion and modernization of the airport's terminal interior "to make the best use of the two floors and the terminal," the Port Authority said. Once complete the airport will boast jet bridges, additional lounge space, and concession spaces to provide more eateries, retail stores and contemporary traveler amenities, tropical landscape and improvements to the flow of vehicular traffic, V.I.P.A. detailed in a pamphlet.

Among the dignitaries at the event were Governor Albert Bryan, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, and a number of invited guests who were part of the gathering, including senators, Office of Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien, Attorney General Denise George (Ms. George is a V.I.P.A. board member), and Lillia King, the daughter of former USVI Governor Cyril E. King.

During the short ceremony, which was intentional as Mr. Dowe wanted to make room for the roughly 3,000 arrivals expected Wednesday, speakers spoke of the executive director's penchant for getting work done, while also expressing a sense of pleasure that important projects at the territory's airports were finally coming to fruition.

For Mr. Dowe, the projects — seven so far since his tenure restarted in 2019 — the successes have depended on the employees of V.I.P.A., who the executive director has constantly praised. He spoke of the important skill of navigating several challenges, including working with the Legislature, the governor, and the federal government to secure funding, and leading a mindset at V.I.P.A. that one must "take night and make day." "The job must get done," Mr. Dowe said in closing remarks.

Ms. Plaskett, using the project as a springboard, said the Virgin Islands must abandon any mindset of lack and poverty and the notion that the USVI cannot support others. Instead, the territory should recognize itself as a beacon of the Caribbean and provide aid to its neighbors, especially in the fight against Covid-19 and vaccine availability.

"Construction projects like this show us and should make us believe that we are not poor people," Ms. Plaskett said. "We need to get out of the feeling of poverty and lack in the Virgin Islands. That we cannot support other people; that we cannot be the light for our brothers and sisters in the Caribbean."

Ms. Frett-Gregory, who worked at V.I.P.A. under the leadership of Mr. Dowe, recalled the genesis of the parking garage expansion and recalled thinking to herself how was it possible. She also alluded to Mr. Dowe's personality and work ethic dominating V.I.P.A. During opening remarks, the senator said she almost joined Port Authority employees when Mr. Dowe asked those employees to stand up. Speaking on development, Ms. Frett-Gregory revealed that the Cyril E. King Airport was built to accommodate 300,000 annual passengers, and has since more than tripled its capacity.

"Today is evidence that great things happen when you have a vision," she said of Mr. Dowe. The Senate president also spoke of the Legislature's work in supporting not only the Port Authority, but [a plethora of other infrastructure projects](#) across the territory.

Governor Bryan, once a V.I.P.A. board member, is no stranger to the operations of the authority. He spoke of Mr. Dowe's phone calls that always include an ask for additional funding for port projects, and said, "Today's gonna rain for sure, because it's the first time that I've come to a Port Authority ribbon-cutting or groundbreaking without it costing me \$4-\$5 million."

Mr. Bryan spoke of the V.I.P.A. projects as part of his administration's dedication to improving the territory's infrastructure. "Today is about vision, planning and persistence," he said, adding that the USVI has an "incredible opportunity to forge a new Virgin Islands." The governor said the territory has received roughly \$1 billion since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic from the federal government, and was sure to note that those funds did not come easy. Instead, it required constant behind-the-scenes efforts from his administration's lobbyists, and he also highlighted the work of Ms. Plaskett in Washington. "Please give her a big round of applause," the governor said.

Mr. Bryan recalled the beginning of the pandemic when the territory's financial future was uncertain, which he joked led to him growing more gray hair while Mr. Dowe's predicament was more drastic: they fell off. The uncertainty led to the USVI securing \$60 million from Banco Popular and FirstBank, however with the abundance of federal dollars pouring into the territory, Mr. Bryan said Wednesday, "We never used it. We never even touched it. Blessings, blessings abound," he said.