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Meetings in Florida Helped Local Leaders Focus Government Efforts on Positioning St. Croix as International Shipping Hub, Gittens Says

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Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Senator Kenneth Gittens, from left, listen to a presentation from Tim Martin, Tropical Shipping's Vice President of Commercial and Trade, during the VI Business Advocacy Tour on Wednesday By. THE OFFICE OF SENATOR KENNETH GITTENS

Senator Kenneth Gittens said in a release Saturday that meetings in Florida last week helped local leaders focus their efforts on making St. Croix an international center for shipping and e-commerce, which he said the island is uniquely positioned for.

Mr. Gittens along with a number of senators, Governor Albert Bryan and officials from the Economic Development Authority and the V.I. Port Authority, [left the USVI for the Ports of Miami and Fort Lauderdale Tuesday](#) for meetings to "explore transshipment, global freight operations and some of the many opportunities created under our new South Shore Free-Trade Zone designation."

"These are lucrative, sustainable industries and it is up to us to take the crisis of the refinery shutdown and turn it into an opportunity for true economic diversification," Mr. Gittens said in the release. "However, we must improve the V.I.'s ports and overall infrastructure to realize our full potential. High volume manufacturers and shippers require better facilities to do more business in the Territory."

He stated that it was essential to "get up and get out" in order to be a part of the global marketplace.

"We can't stay home and expect opportunities to drop into our laps," he said. "Our discussions helped us to create new working relationships and to better understand the incredible potential of the Southshore Free-Trade zone."

Mr. Gittens organized the Florida meetings in his capacity as chairman of the 34th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture. After engaging in discussions with a major online retailer earlier this year in regard to bringing some of its operations to St. Croix, the senator corralled the aforementioned group in order to establish a united strategy for bringing in new investment, improving the territory's ports and developing St. Croix's south shore, according to the release.

The South Shore Free-Trade Zone initiative, spearheaded by Senator Novelle Francis, eliminates some barriers to trade and designates 3,000 acres on the south shore of St Croix as an enterprise zone to facilitate the transshipment industry, light manufacturing, and V.I. Blue Economy initiatives, according to the release.

Officials visited the ports of Miami and Palm Beach and met with business executives to include Tropical Shipping's leadership team. Senator Gittens noted the significant investment that Tropical has made in the territory and thanked the company for hosting a tour of port operations and for introducing the delegation to the leadership of the Riviera Beach Redevelopment Authority, which is managing the restoration of a formerly blighted neighborhood through private/public partnerships. The delegation also met with both Riviera Beach's mayor and city manager.

"Through our meetings we have expanded our vision in terms of what is possible for the territory and created new opportunities for collaboration – there is so much to build upon," Mr. Gittens said. "Seeing the operations here has been very enlightening. The Territory can serve as a transshipment hub for the rest of the Caribbean, but we must step up to the plate and aggressively sell ourselves as such."

He noted that business leaders have a great deal of interest in St. Croix, however major improvements, beginning with the ports, are required. The senator said he was working to identify local funding to enhance the port infrastructure to include the purchase of loading cranes.

"We have to realize that the ports are truly the gateway to our economy and invest in them, not only by improving the overall infrastructure, but also by investing in our workforce. Tropical Shipping has expressed interest in partnering with the Virgin Islands government to include us in

their internship program to better prepare our people for the transshipment jobs of today and the future. We must invest in our homegrown workforce, rather than be willing to supplement with imported labor,” he stated.

As Liaison to the White House, Mr. Gittens has been attending briefings on the infrastructure legislation now being considered by Congress, according to the release.

“I am also going to push to see that some of the federal funding we anticipate through the pending \$1 trillion infrastructure bill is invested in this area,” he said. “The most important thing is to be ready with a plan to ensure the timely expenditure of these funds. We can’t afford to be sitting on this money when our people need jobs and our ports, roads and public facilities remain in such bad shape.”

The meetings and site visits concluded on Friday evening with a tour and presentation by Lifeline Pharmaceutical in Doral.