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Dowe Gets it Done: First Phase of Airport Terminal Expansion Project on St. Croix Completed Months Ahead of Schedule

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Local leaders, including Gov. Albert Bryan, center, and VIPA Exec. Dir. Carlton Dowe, right of Mr. Bryan, participate in a ribbon-cutting exercise for the first phase of HERA Terminal Expansion Project. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

Phase 1 of the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport Terminal Expansion and Modernization Project, which was launched in August 2020 and set to complete in February 2022, has not only been completed ahead of time but the ribbon-cutting ceremony signaling the conclusion of phase 1 was held on Monday.

V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe was high in praise for the role of the Legislature to ensure that match funding was secured after the Port Authority became qualified for \$7 million in grant funding from the U.S. Economic Development Authority.

“This specific project couldn’t have happened without the cooperation of the Virgin Islands Legislature,” said Mr. Dowe, who was lauded throughout the ceremony by every speaker as someone who gets the job done. “Often times we say they don’t do nothing, but we have got to be honest and fair. At least for the Port Authority, I will tell you that most of these projects would have been very difficult to come about without the support of the Virgin Islands Legislature from the 32nd, the 33rd and now the 34th,” Mr. Dowe said.

“The project could have basically stalled for a good minute or more because the Port Authority was struggling and wondering where we will find \$1.6 million in this guava crop and I said, you know what, let me make a couple of calls...I figure if I get three strong St. Croix senators to be in support of this \$1.6 million and I get the Senate president in St. Thomas then it will be good,” he said while sharing some of the early challenges facing the first phase of the project.

“We were able to get the Legislature to get \$1.6 million to the Port Authority so that we could meet the federal grant, and the public needs to understand that once we work together nothing is insurmountable in this territory,” he declared.

“The world is not waiting for the Virgin Islands; we have got to be aggressive and press the envelope ourselves...The Caribbean isn’t waiting for us,” he said while disclosing to the audience other initiatives undertaken in other Caribbean islands aimed at boosting economic development — especially in the tourism sector.

Phase one entails enclosing 5,500 square feet of walkway space to increase the seating capacity in the lounge, refurbishing the existing passenger lounge space and restrooms, enclosing the 1,100 square-foot open-air gardens with a new roof structure to provide additional concessions space, and upgrading the mechanical systems for the additional air-conditioned area.

Phase one was estimated to cost \$8.6 million and was funded via a \$7 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce-Economic Development Administration in 2019 with a local match of \$1.6 million from the V.I. Port Authority. The construction was anticipated to take 18 months and be completed in March 2022.

Mr. Dowe shared that what makes the project so complex is the fact that the entire new area where the ceremony was taking place is an active facility. “That in of itself poses challenges every day and it’s the public flying through here, passing through here...We constructed this facility under flights leaving out of here and then as they leave somebody calling James Benton saying put up a cordon quick, and work starts into the night,” he said.

Throughout the project, there was cooperation from the relevant federal agencies to make the work that was to be undertaken possible. The contract for the project was awarded to J. Benton Construction LLC. This is the fourth project to be completed for the Virgin Island Ports Authority by the company and according to its president, James Benton, each new project was more challenging than the previous.

“For this project, we had to charter planes and fly materials in when we had delays,” he said while disclosing that more than 40 sub-contractors were affiliated with the project.

Mrs. Adrienne L Williams–Octalien, director of the Virgin Islands Office of Disaster Recovery in her remarks spoke about the positive impact the expansion will have on the territory. Her office engaged in the sporadic inspection of the project.

“The resilience that will come from the strengthening of this airport is going to be unshakeable and the experience any person visiting these shores, we are working to make sure that their experience is unforgettable,” she said.

Before cutting the ribbon there were remarks by several officials, legislators, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett and Governor Albert Bryan as well as the various senators whose involvement and influence not only saw the completion of phase one, but for the other phases that will follow. The entire expansion is estimated to be completed within a six-year period and cost \$140 million.

Ms. Plaskett's work in Washington to ascertain that federal dollars are provided to the territory remains an indelible part of the effort.

Mr. Bryan used the occasion to premiere an animation video that displayed the future layout of the airport at the conclusion of the project.