

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Where Was Gittens for All the Achievements of the Port Authority? Dowe Assails Senator for Only Highlighting Negative, Never Mentioning Positive

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Local leaders, including Gov. Albert Bryan, center, and VIPA Exec. Dir. Carlton Dowe, right of Mr. Bryan, participated in a Dec. 19, 2021 ribbon-cutting exercise for the first phase of HERA Terminal Expansion Project. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

V.I. Port Authority Executive Director in a statement issued late Friday assailed Senator Kenneth Gittens for posts the senator made on social media criticizing VIPA for faded signs at the entrance at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport Terminal, and the pending repairs at the Ann E. Abramson Marine Facility on St. Croix.

Mr. Dowe contends that while the authority plans on changing the signs within weeks, and shared such with Mr. Gittens on Thursday during a Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture hearing chaired by Mr. Gittens, the senator has never taken to social media to highlight all the positive work the authority has achieved.

Under Mr. Dowe's leadership, the Port Authority has completed more major projects than any arm of government in the Bryan administration.

"During the hearing, I informed Senator Gittens that the HERA Terminal parking lot signs would be replaced. For the public's edification, VIPA's airport management will install new signs in the HERA parking lot within the next few weeks. Regarding the airport road markings and signage, the airport roads in the territory are federal highways. However, prior to the hearing, my staff contacted Public Works to address the road issues and striping off the main road into the airport on St. Croix. Public Works has responded favorably to our requests," Mr. Dowe said.

He added, "Regarding the pending repairs to the Abramson cruise pier, I stated in my testimony and repeated verbally during the hearing that the projects to repair the cruise facility on St. Croix have been fully funded via appropriations from the Legislature and via the Bryan/Roach Administration. They include the repair of the tender landing pier and the concrete storm panels. I explained to Senator Gittens that while VIPA has already bid these projects and selected contractors to perform the work, we are awaiting eight special conditions from the St. Croix Coastal Zone Commission before we can be issued a permit to proceed. My team and I are awaiting CZM's response.

"At the May 5th hearing, Senator Gittens also questioned us about a dilapidated crane at the Abramson Pier that he assumed belonged to the Port Authority. This historical landmark is not the property of the Virgin Islands Port Authority. Our marine manager on St. Croix had contacted the St. Croix Landmarks Society even prior to the May 5th hearing to ask them to either repair or remove the crane as it is a safety concern and an eyesore.

"I must convey my disappointment, however, that Senator Gittens has chosen to use social media to highlight parking lot signs and has not highlighted or posted any photos or videos of the \$60 million in major port infrastructure projects currently ongoing on St. Croix. My 16-page testimony and PowerPoint presentation submitted by my staff and I provided ample details and photographs of the millions of dollars being expended on port projects on St. Croix within the last three years. I also provided information regarding the \$50 million in projects progressing on St. Thomas and informed the Committee that VIPA is poised to begin major improvements to the Loredon L. Boynes Dock in St. John later this year."

The V.I. Port Authority has made significant progress in improving the territory's port infrastructure over the last three years territory-wide, including the following:

- The new passenger terminal built at the Gallows Bay Port completed in 2019 (\$1.5 million);
- The new U.S. Customs and Border Protection Terminal in Cruz Bay completed in April 2021 (\$1.9 million);

- The expanded and modernized domestic passenger lounge at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport Terminal completed in December 2021 (\$8.6 million);
- The new cargo terminal at the Gordon A. Finch Molasses Pier, which will open in June 2022 (\$14.5 million);
- The new cargo terminal at the Wilfred “Bomba” Allick Port and Transshipment Center (the Containerport) that will open in the fall of 2022 (\$15.9 million);
- Repair of the CEKA commercial apron at Gate 5 that will be completed in the summer of 2022 (\$4.1 million); and
- The construction of the new parking and transportation center at the Cyril E. King Airport, which will be completed in the summer of 2023 (\$26.8 million).

"One of VIPA's most noteworthy achievements stated in my testimony is that the Authority did not furlough or lay off any of its 365 employees during the pandemic - despite the drastic decrease in revenues due to the two-year COVID-19 pandemic that caused unemployment rates to skyrocket worldwide," Mr. Dowe said. "During the pandemic, VIPA worked closely with the Legislature and the Bryan/Roach Administration to move this territory forward and begin projects that had sat dormant for years. These are monumental achievements that occurred during a pandemic that devastated the world's economy. However, despite the facts presented, the salient point that Senator Gittens chooses to highlight for the Port Authority is airport parking lot signs.

"There have been no social media posts from Senator Gittens regarding the upcoming opening of the new terminal at the Gordon A. Finch Molasses Pier. There is no post about VIPA's largest warehouse being built at the Wilfred “Bomba” Allick Port and Transshipment Center on St. Croix. There were also no repeated posts about the beautifully and newly expanded Henry E. Rohlsen Airport Terminal domestic departure lounge.

"Senator Gittens was also present at the recent Seatrade Cruise Global Convention where VIPA and the Royal Caribbean Group announced jointly that Royal Caribbean committed to tripling the number of cruise visitors to St. Croix. Royal Caribbean expects to bring up to 140,000 cruise visitors to St. Croix next year. This signals tremendous growth for the island's economy and opportunities for our residents that make their living via the tourism and cargo industry on St. Croix. This phenomenal news that will improve the livelihood of hundreds of residents of St. Croix has not been repeatedly highlighted by Senator Gittens.

"All senators know that I am responsive and easy to reach if there are any concerns regarding the operations of VIPA's port facilities. As a former Senator, I am aware of what occurs during this time of the year."