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Port Authority Weighs Potential Solutions as Limited Travel Options Between USVI Becomes Main Discussion at Meeting

Travel / **Published On January 19, 2023 04:01 AM /**

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Cape Air has been struggling to retain pilots for its USVI operations, leading to a drastic reduction of flights from April 2022 to present, according to V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe.

The issue of strengthening connectivity between the islands of the USVI occupied a chunk of time during the V.I. Port Authority's Governing Board meeting on Wednesday morning.

Some of the most spirited discussion occurred late in the meeting when board member Lionel Jacob noted that "over the past month, and probably a little more, it's becoming increasingly difficult to travel between both islands."

“I’m talking about the difficulty of inter-island travel, by boat or by air,” Mr. Jacob continued. He wondered whether VIPA needed to play a role in “ensuring expeditious travel between both islands,” and suggested the board look at the issue. Mr. Jacob argued that, together with the Departments of Tourism and Public Works, VIPA should work to “assist citizens’ travel between both islands.” However, he noted the efforts of Public Works in maintaining the ferry route between St. Thomas and St. Croix.

Department of Public Works Commissioner and VIPA Board Member, Derek Gabriel, said Public Works was “actively trying” to enhance that service, seeking grant funding in order to do so. On the air side, Mr. Gabriel disclosed that offering subsidies for intra-territory travel was not a practice of the U.S. Department of Transportation. As a result, adding capacity to the ferry service was even more crucial, especially as “there is a level of commerce that is missed, because a lot of our vendors don’t have affordable inter-island travel.”

VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe weighed in on the discussion, cautioning that VIPA should restrain its role to facilitating the provision of travel services through temporary reductions in some of the fees the authority charges operators. “If we do that, we have to make it available to all airlines evenly across the board,” Mr. Dowe said. He also suggested that the central government could consider minimum revenue guarantees to encourage airlines to keep a regular service between islands. VIPA has already “bled at the aviation side”, Mr. Dowe said, warning his board against over-reach.

The executive director continued, arguing that the problems faced by Virgin Islanders in this regard were but a microcosm of a national, and even a global issue. “We can’t escape what’s happening in the rest of the world. What’s clear is that there is a pilot shortage — after Covid thousands retired — and some of these small airlines now trying to recruit and bring back people who have retired, such as Cape Air.”

The demand for pilots is also increasing the rate at which larger airlines tempt pilots away from jobs flying commuter routes, said Mr. Dowe, which is exacerbating the shortage at the local level.

A query from a board member about whether additional seaplane services could be added was shot down when it was explained that the territory was [locked into exclusivity with Seaborne](#) until the current lease expired.

In somewhat of a precursor to the pilot shortage discussion, earlier in Wednesday’s meeting of the VIPA Board of Governors, Mr. Dowe noted that VIPA was meeting with stakeholders in order to discuss a program that will encourage interest in aviation in students across the territory. The authority had already engaged in discussions with V.I. Department of Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington, Senator Novelle Francis, and several other agency and NGO representatives, on the subject of an “aviation school plan”. “In terms of what we do in the aviation industry,” Mr. Dowe said, “I think we do have a little responsibility to encourage young people, to foster their growth.”

He went on to note that the authority was currently executing 10 active projects in the St. Thomas-St. John District worth approximately \$65 million altogether, while on St. Croix, 15 projects were underway, worth about \$47 million.

After Mr. Dowe concluded his report, the Board voted en bloc for its executive officers and committee chairs. Nominated and approved unanimously were Willard John as chair, Mr. Gabriel, the Public Works commissioner as vice chair, and Kevin Rodriguez as secretary. Mr. Rodriguez is also Governor Albert Bryan’s asst. chief of staff.

Mr. Gabriel chairs the Finance Committee, Lionel Jacobs heads the Property Committee, the Project & Operations Committee is chaired by Leona Smith, and Mr. Rodriguez is at the helm of the Personnel Committee.

That committee, Mr. Rodriguez said, would meet to consider a suggestion from the floor that the board appoint an administrative staffer to handle tasks on behalf of the board. The officer could replace the current position of auditor which was budgeted, as suggested by board member Celestino White, as that individual has reportedly not been available to the board due to illness and other circumstances for approximately two years. After the Personnel Committee convenes to discuss the matter, a recommendation will be made to the board.

The VIPA Board also voted on several motions during Wednesday's meeting, ranging from increasing spending limits on two authority credit cards used for purchases and travel & training logistics; extending contracts for risk management services, and approving master service agreements for emergency paving services at the Cyril E. King and Henry Rohlsen airports and aviation planning consultants for VIPA.

Two non-exclusive lease agreements for car rental companies were approved for Cyril E. King, with both guaranteeing VIPA approximately \$1 million in revenue over their three-year lifespan. Change orders were also approved for two ongoing projects. The restroom renovation on Lindbergh Bay Beach in Charlotte Amalie, nearing completion, needed \$9,750 worth of additional work to be successfully finished, while the work at the Ann E. Abrahamson marine facility required \$35,600 for the installation and removal of barriers to safely guide passengers while work is underway.

Voting on approving a payment plan for a delinquent lease-holder was put on hold pending verification of whether the individual had applied for PPP loans for his businesses.