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Soaring High: Fly The Whale Launches in U.S. Virgin Islands Amid Praise for Local Leadership

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A Fly the Whale pilot prepares to land at the Cyril E. King Airport on Monday, April 24, 2023 on one of the airline's inaugural flights between St. Croix and St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The U.S. Virgin Islands has formally welcomed new carrier Fly The Whale with a ribbon cutting ceremony on Monday, and a pervading theme at the launch event was the tenacity of the V.I. Port Authority's executive director, Carlton Dowe, to get things done.

From Governor Albert Bryan at the top, to everyone else who spoke at the event — including Fly the Whale President Omar ErSelcuk — Mr. Dowe was described as a man with the ability to not only start but complete projects in a way no other has been able to mimic.

Mr. ErSelcuk went into detail explaining how Mr. Dowe moved mountains to see that the launch of the new carrier happen in April, noting that obstacles that seemed insurmountable were conquered. Mr. ErSelcuk later argued that while the carrier is headquartered in New Haven Connecticut, “the Virgin Islands needs its own carrier.” He pledged to bridge that gap, somewhat. “We are starting by hiring over 20 people here in the USVI and with your support and help we can continue to grow that,” Mr. ErSelcuk said. He expressed confidence in the venture, stating, “I would like to see Fly The Whale succeed on St. Thomas/ St. Croix and we need your support for that, and once that is successful we will continue to grow it.”

During his own remarks, Mr. Dowe recounted the airline’s efforts to navigate processes such as licensing, leasing, and trademarking, thanking public servants at the various departments for their efficiency along the way. The VIPA head noted that while carriers will make route decisions based on financial considerations, it is important that the Port Authority and other relevant agencies do what is within their power to lay the groundwork, offer incentives and remove red tape to assist in these decisions.

Willard John, chair of the V.I. Port Authority Board began his remarks by sharing his personal difficulties as a member of the private sector who relies heavily upon inter-island travel. “It’s important for business purposes to have this reliable transportation so people can get their business done,” he said. “It’s also important for people in the community to have access to the other islands because we are one Virgin Islands, and this brings us closer together.”

Joseph Boschulte, commissioner of the USVI Department of Tourism, impressed upon attendees that reliable air service is also a critical component of the territory’s tourism product. “We like our visitors to be able to have what I call the trifecta – hit St. Thomas, hit St. John and hit St. Croix on the same trip,” Mr. Boschulte said. The tourism commissioner explained that what generally prohibits visitors from fully enjoying the destination’s offerings is the lack of options for travel between the islands. He observed that with Fly The Whale’s 8-10 daily flights, day trips will become a more viable option.

Mr. Boschulte further expressed that while this major development is expected to stimulate and strengthen tourism, it is also an important move for the residents of the Virgin Islands. “As important as visitors coming to the territory is, the ability of us the residents to move between the islands” is very important, Mr. Boschulte noted. He explained that with Fly The Whale’s first flight scheduled this week, Virgin Islanders can not only travel to St. Thomas more easily for carnival festivities, but those who do not wish to participate can just as easily hop across to St. Croix for a staycation. He emphasized that while the potential for island hopping remains great, “it’s only possible if it’s affordable and there are options.”

Governor Albert Bryan, who spoke at the end of the event, echoed the comments of those before him and announced a program soon to be launched through the Dept. of Tourism that will provide ticket discounts to residents who travel inter-island to participate in leisure activities. The governor also said that the launch of Fly the Whale is part of his administration's goal of meeting the critical needs of Virgin Islanders, echoing that the new option for travel between the islands creates much needed competition, which results in affordable rates.

Senate President Novelle Francis also shared remarks, essentially repeating the remarks of others who observed that Fly the Whale will have a deeply positive impact on inter-island travel.

Fly The Whale will make St. Croix’s Henry E. Rohlsen Airport its home base, employing local staff to assist with operations such as reservations and bookings. The carrier will provide daily

service beginning April 28 using two Cessna 208 Grand Caravans, which feature commuter and executive commuter configurations.

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