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VIPA Holds First Town Hall on Upcoming Major Airport Project: No Job Losses Expected

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VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe addressed the St. Croix community on Tues. May 16 in the first of several town hall meetings planned to discuss the modernization of the territory's two airports. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The V.I. Port Authority (VIPA) held a town hall meeting Tuesday night, where VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe gave an extensive update on the public-private partnership process for the authority's [major airport expansion and upgrade project](#).

Tuesday's meeting was the first of three initial town halls planned for the project, with the second taking place today at the Rotary West Meeting Hall in Frederiksted at 6:00 p.m. A selfsame event is planned for St. Thomas on Thursday at the VIPA Administration Building in the Third Floor

Conference Room at 6:00 p.m.

Speaking to a cross-section of stakeholders, Dowe reiterated that VIPA had held meetings with various groups including the aviation unions, airline partners, aviation tenants, and the Hotel & Tourism Association. He explained that these meetings were designed to keep stakeholders informed about the progress of the project and to solicit their feedback and concerns, a practice he affirmed would continue.

Dowe emphasized that while these consultations have taken place, no decisions regarding contractual matters have been made. "The issuance of the Request for Proposal (RFP) is scheduled for June 25, but I want to remind all of us that no negotiations have started," he clarified.

The proposal submission deadline is set for January 2024, the executive director said, with the goal of taking the chosen proposal to the board in February 2024. Groundbreaking for the redevelopment of the airport terminals is planned for the second quarter of next year.

Responding to concerns about how the deal would impact the local labor force, Dowe reiterated that no job losses of airport staff were expected by any partnership deal that will ultimately be made, but could not provide much detail on how exactly VIPA would ensure that this is the case. However, the executive director made it clear that local involvement is crucial to the project's success, and made a point to note that two local attorneys are advising on the project.

He also defended the public-private partnership model for the project, arguing that neither the VIPA nor the Virgin Islands government had hundreds of millions of dollars to invest in making sorely-needed upgrades to the territory's two major airports. He said the urgent need for expansion required innovative thinking and reaching outside of the box to find the resources necessary to make the project a reality.

Addressing the need for the upgrade, Dowe argued that the current facilities are inadequate for the volume of traffic the airport sees. "Let me tell you right now, for years, the Cyril E. King Airport alone has seen 900,000 people fall into the same footprint that was designed to accommodate 300,000 passengers," he stated, calling for serious efforts to address this issue.

"We want something, they want something as well," Mr. Dowe contended, responding to skepticism surrounding the profit motive inherent in a private sector project. "We try to make sometimes profit seem like a bad word, it's not a bad word." He explained that what VIPA wanted from a winning proposal was "one of mutual respect, one of mutual possibility, and so on. In other words, we expect them to make money. We want to make money. We want more flights from Europe and London and all over the Caribbean. That's what we want."

Dowe also took time to clarify what he called "misinformation" that had been circulating about one of the firms involved in the bidding process. "Carlton Dowe or no board member, to my knowledge, has any affiliation with any of these people". He emphasized that Aecon, one of the three companies which submitted a qualifications packet under the umbrella name of VIports Partners, was not the same as AECOM, an infrastructure company that has previously done work for the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority.

The executive director also called for public support and understanding, arguing that the airport expansion and upgrade are vital to the entire community. He stressed that the project would address long standing issues, such as the difficulties currently faced by disabled and elderly passengers.

"This is our home, and we must care about our home," Dowe concluded, calling on all stakeholders to support the project.

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