

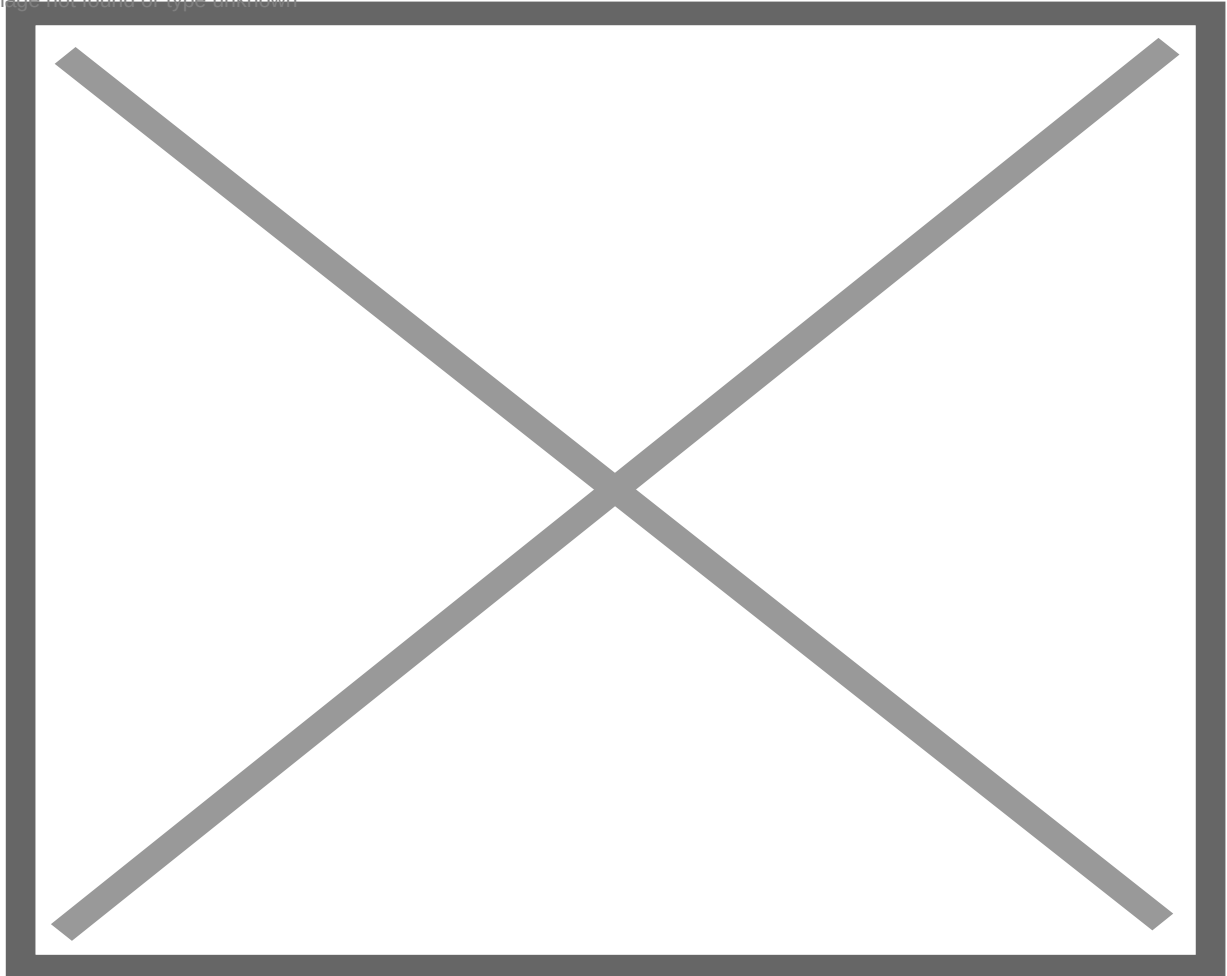
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Senate Committee Hears VIPA Director's Optimistic Take on Airlift and Passenger Traffic

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Major carriers at the Cyril E. King Airport in St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe spoke glowingly about the new air connections between the U.S. Virgin Islands and other Caribbean destinations during his appearance before the Senate committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance on Monday. “The last time we were before this body, most of what we’re reading here was not in place,” he noted.

Some of the new airlift include Cape Air’s eight flights a week from St. Thomas to Nevis since February of this year, and the establishment of Sky High Aviation’s twice weekly service from St.

Thomas to Santo Domingo in March. Mr. Dowe also noted that Sky High Aviation is working out the logistics to enable its aircraft to fly between Santo Domingo and St. Croix. Additionally, Silver Airways has resumed island airbridge services between St. Croix and St. Thomas, and also flies to San Juan, and Fly the Whale is the [new, exciting airline](#) that spurred Seaborne to restart inter-island travel.

Internationally, “VIPA will continue to work closely with the Department of Tourism as they restore international negotiation with airlines in Denmark, Italy and Canada,” Mr. Dowe said. St. Croix’s 10,000+ foot runway and upcoming terminal upgrades, he expects, “can attract flights from the United States, Canada and Europe for winter 2024/2025.”

Mr. Dowe mentioned that a previously utilized [airline incentive](#) is currently in place as a means to attract additional airlift on new or existing routes at both international airports.

Despite the positive spin, committee chair Senator Donna Frett-Gregory questioned the trend in airlift numbers. In 2019, passenger traffic stood at close to a million, but that has since dropped to 830,000, she stated, which VIPA Chief Financial Officer confirmed that projected air traffic for the current fiscal year is 604,000 to St. Thomas, and 209,000 to St. Croix. “These numbers are very concerning,” Ms. Frett-Gregory declared. “So what is that conversation that you’re having with the Department of Tourism and Virgin Islands Port Authority, to ensure that we are able to see additional airlift in the territory?”

While reiterating his optimism that numbers would pick up, Mr. Dowe blamed “world events” for the downturn, including the cost of fuel and limited fuel storage options in the territory. Despite this, Mr. Dowe expressed his belief that air passenger traffic would grow once again. Territorial Airport Manager Jerome Sheridan supported his executive director, explaining that some issues relating to airlift are outside of the control of local authorities, including carriers using older aircraft to service these routes. However, “I’m just as optimistic” as Mr. Dowe, said Mr. Sheridan. “We are pushing 100 percent to improve the airlift of the U.S. Virgin Islands. We don’t play second to nobody,” he declared.