

V.I. DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM AND OTHER AGENCIES SHARES POST-HURRICANES UPDATE

Date : February 23, 2018

St. Thomas- The Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, chaired by Sen. Neville James, held a meeting on Friday, at the Capitol Building to receive testimony from officials from the U.S.V.I. Department of Tourism and the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA) on the status post-Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria.

Thus far, 4,420 people were accommodated with 1,385 units in hotels, villas and Airbnb on the St. Croix District stated Commissioner of the Department of Tourism Beverly Nicholson-Doty. Similarly, on the St. Thomas-St. John District 11,000 people were accommodated weekly with over 2,503 units available. Major airlines such as Spirit, Delta, and Jet Blue Airways will increase services to the Territory gradually in the next several months. Unfortunately, there is an anticipated 30% reduction of cruise arrivals to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

“Considering that there will be over 5,000 tourists flying into St. Croix per week for 2018, what was the number for 2017?” asked Sen. Brian Smith. Commissioner Doty stated that 6,000 visitors flew into St. Croix weekly last year. However, if that number was to increase there will be a challenge with accommodations because some hotels still do not have a definitive re-open date.

“The lack of hotel accommodations makes me wonder about the quality of available units,” said Sen. Tregenza Roach. “Does Tourism monitors customer satisfaction for Airbnb?” He asked. Commissioner Doty said, “One of the challenges post-hurricanes is that we do not know where are all the Airbnb locations. Therefore, we are unable to effectively monitor the service.”

Marketing strategies for the Department of Tourism include promoting volunteer projects for tourists, launching the “Still Nice” social media campaign, updating the website and hosting press trips in the upcoming months. Some of the press trips are the Marine Industry, St. Croix Food & Wine, St. Thomas Carnival, Agriculture Fair, and the St. John Villas. Sen. Positive Nelson stated that Tourism needs to expand their marketing plan. “In addition to Agriculture Tourism, there should be Cannabis Tourism, Health Tourism, and Conference Tourism. The Department can capitalize on all aspects of tourism. However, they are not.”

“Can you expound on the relationship with the Department of Tourism and VIDOA?” asked Sen. James. Commissioner Doty said, “We promote Agriculture Tourism by inviting media to various events, and introducing locally grown crops to tourists as it relates to their culinary experience.”

Separately, the post-hurricane update of VIDOA is as follows: The administrative building on St. Thomas sustained flooding and mold. The greenhouse was damaged, and there is limited road

access to farms due to erosion. On St. John, the Coral Bay Office, greenhouse and adjacent buildings sustained damages. St. Croix administrative offices and two greenhouses were compromised. The expanded irrigation system in the Community Gardens and the LaReine Vegetable Market was adversely affected. The territory-wide destruction of the greenhouses and seedlings sales has negatively impacted revenues. VIDOA does not have disaster funds stated Carlos Robles, Commissioner of VIDOA.

“The Territory is in a unique situation because our suppliers in Florida and Puerto Rico also suffered hurricane-related damages,” said Sen. Kurt Vialet. He asked, “Do you know when will the greenhouses be re-built?” Commissioner Robles said, “This is a tightrope because FEMA will reduce the funds if a permanent structure for the greenhouse is established.”

Sen. Marvin Blyden asked, “Since VIDOA lost 90,000 gallons of water from one of the storage tanks on St. Croix, will the department relocate the tanks to avoid future damages in the future?” Commissioner Robles stated that finding an adequate location is a challenge.

Separately, the Virgin Islands Port Authority (VIPA) and the West Indian Company, Ltd. (WICO) shared an update. Damien Cartwright, Assistant Executive Director/Director of Engineering of VIPA, said, “There are \$85 million in hurricane-related damages to port facilities. However, most ports were reopened shortly after both storms to enable emergency personnel and supplies to arrive timely in the Territory.” Post-hurricanes repairing/rebuilding the airports and seaports are a priority. Lamartec, Inc. was selected by VIPA to be the Construction Manager at Risk for hurricane restoration projects throughout the Territory.

Clifford Graham, President and CEO of WICO stated that post-hurricanes there were utility poles, trees, sediments and sunken boats deposited in the inner berth. VIPA applied for an emergency dredging permit, and when granted the work began in October 2017. A total of 1,100 cubic yards of debris and sediments were removed from the inner berth. The dredging enabled WICO to host three cruise ships in November 2017. Hurricane damages sustained to WICO facilities included holes in the roofs, missing windows and doors, missing parts of the perimeter fencing and broken light poles.

Senators present are Neville James, Positive Nelson, Marvin Blyden, Tregenza Roach, Dwayne DeGraff, Janette Millin Young and Brian Smith.

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