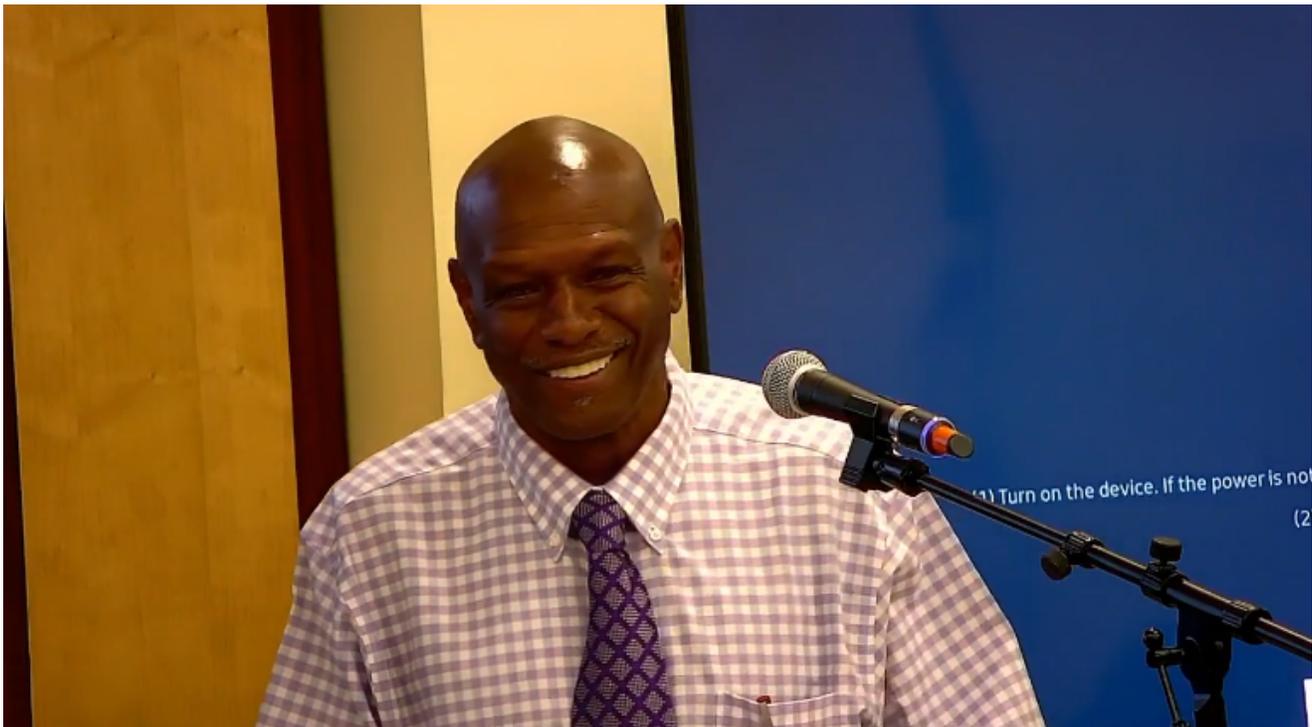




VIPA Presents Airport Upgrade Plans in Cruz Bay Meeting

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VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe explains the Port Authority's plans to upgrade the territory's airports in a presentation at the Legislative Annex in Cruz Bay. (Source File Photo)

As V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe made his fourth presentation to inform the public about plans to overhaul the territory's airports, he talked about his mother.

Dowe spoke of her need to get medical attention in the states, and the struggle to get her from the tarmac into the airplane using a mechanical lift because the airports in the Virgin Islands lack jet bridges.

Jet bridges, "nice" restaurants, and expanded shopping areas are just some of the amenities Dowe envisions as the Port Authority moves forward to establish a public-private partnership in order to rebuild and manage the airports on St. Thomas and St. Croix.

Dowe met with a handful of St. John residents Friday evening at the Legislative Annex in Cruz Bay to present the “P3” — public-private partnership model — the Port Authority is now considering. It was the final public meeting held within the past three weeks throughout the territory intended to bring transparency to the process.

VIPA officials have been meeting for months with local senators and government officials, tenants, community groups, as well as representatives from airlines, unions, and federal agencies including the Federal Aviation Administration, Transportation Security Administration, and Customs and Border Protection.

Under the model the Port Authority is considering, the V.I. government will maintain ownership of the airport buildings and runways but will choose one or more companies to reconstruct and manage the facilities.

“We are not privatizing the airport,” Dowe said. “We are not giving up our assets. Ownership remains with VIPA, which means the V.I. government. I want to make that perfectly clear.”

Dowe said VIPA is in good standing to get federal grants to make improvements to the airport for safety issues but does not have the funds to upgrade the facilities to compete as an ever-growing tourist destination. The second floor of Cyril E. King Airport on St. Thomas is now empty and available for development.

King Airport was designed to accommodate 300,000 passengers a year, but officials expect nearly 800,000 passengers in 2023 based on current numbers.

The advantage of creating a public-private partnership is, “We’re not using our own money, the hundreds of millions it takes to build these facilities,” said Dowe. The companies under consideration “have the capacity to bring in other players, the resources, and the equipment. They have built airports before.”

As part of the United States, the territory is limited in how much it can increase fees. The current head tax on airline tickets is capped at \$4.50. Unlike many other Caribbean destinations, the Virgin Islands is prohibited from collecting departure fees as St. Martin does, collecting \$35 per passenger, according to Dowe.

In December 2022, the Port Authority issued a request for qualifications for the proposed work. From the many responses, the Port Authority’s board selected four qualified proposers as potential partners in order to modernize, invest in and improve the USVI’s airports.

The four chosen firms (listed in alphabetical order along with some of their projects) are:

- **daa International**

Dublin Airport; Cork Airport; Red Sea International Airport; and Dusseldorf Airport

- **Vantage Airport Group Ltd.**
LaGuardia Terminal B; JFK Terminal 6; Lynden Pindling International Airport (Bahamas); and Cyprus Airports
- **Vinci Airports**
Hollywood Burbank Airport; Orlando Sanford International Airport; Santo Domingo Airport; and Puerto Plata Airport
- **Vlports Partners (Aecon, Tikehau Star Infra and Avports)** Bermuda Airport; Albany Airport; Detroit North Airport; and LAX-Tom Bradley International Terminal.

Dowe was quick to say that “VIPA is not currently in negotiations with any of the four short-listed proposers/firms.” In June, the Port Authority expects to issue a request for proposals and spend the next six months in collaborative discussions about potential designs, lease structures, and financial arrangements.

In February 2024, Dowe expects the VIPA board to have selected one or more preferred proposers and begin the permitting process; he said he plans to break ground in the last quarter of 2024.

At Friday’s meeting, Dowe said the P3 model is not new. Twenty years ago, the Port Authority set out to repair an “old, dilapidated, run-down hangar filled with bees’ nests” and ended up establishing a partnership with Standard Aviation to build the facility at King Airport for private and recreational flying. Their arrangement was so successful it has now been extended to 30 years, Dowe said.

Among the benefits Dowe foresees are enhanced training for airport personnel, a more satisfying experience for travelers, and the facilities to attract airlines offering international flights. In the meantime, “We’re working to keep this in the public eye, regardless of where it might lead us,” he said.

After discussion of the airports was completed on Friday, Dowe also said the Port Authority was currently leasing out space in the gravel lot near Cruz Bay to hold equipment for the July 4th Celebration.

When St. John’s carnival is over, the restrooms in Red Hook will be upgraded, and contractors will begin the expansion of the covering over the dock in Cruz Bay.