PROMOTING THE UNIQUE VALUES OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS IN THE FACE OF CUBAN TOURISM

The full opening of Cuba to the North American tourism market will undoubtedly have significant ramifications for the tourism economy of the entire Caribbean. It is appropriate that this committee carefully consider the potential impacts to the US Virgin Islands, and identify the strategies that will be most likely to succeed in enhancing and growing our tourism product in the face of this potential new competitor.

I believe that the allure of Cuba will initially be to the "adventure seeking" tourist who has had a fascination with this destination but has been unable to satisfy that fascination due to travel restrictions. The promise of Cuban music, arts, food and culture will undoubtedly be heavily marketed to the American tourist. We should compare those market attributes with what attracts visitors to the USVI.

Two years ago, Condé Nast Traveler conducted a survey and reported that St John, USVI, was the “Best Island in the Caribbean and Atlantic Region” in several of their survey categories. This survey is very instructive and should inform our strategy and messaging in the face of new competitive options in the tourism market.

The single most important thing that we can do to defend and enhance our tourism product is to protect those qualities most valued by our visitors, and which are difficult to find elsewhere in the Caribbean. The Condé Nast survey ranked visitor attitudes toward Caribbean and Atlantic islands in a number of categories. St John, USVI was voted number two overall, and ranked the highest of all islands in three categories: (1) Scenery, (2) Beaches and (3) Atmosphere.

It's no surprise that St John is so highly rated – the presence of the Virgin Islands National Park has ensured that large portions of the island are protected from the development which has impacted scenic beauty on so many other islands. The beaches, protected from commercial development, remain the most highly rated in the Caribbean. The fact that commercial establishments, such as lodging and restaurants are less highly rated on St John than elsewhere in the Caribbean did not diminish the overall appeal of St John as a tourism destination.

So when this committee ponders the question of "what should we do to combat the threats and leverage the opportunities presented by Cuban tourism" I believe it is essential that we focus on the attributes that make our Virgin Islands special in the eyes of the visitor.

As a resident of St John, I do not feel qualified to make statements about St Thomas or St Croix. I know they are each valued for different characteristics – the historical context, the shopping, the accessibility, the people, the culture – but I do know St John very well and have spoken with

countless residents, tourists, hotel managers and villa owners about what makes St John unique.

I offer the following advice to this committee. First, we should commit to preserving the surviving open and natural spaces of our islands. We should ensure that development only takes place in those locales where it will not erode the natural beauty that attracts visitors. We should strive to maintain St John's position as the number one ranked island of the Caribbean for Scenery, Beaches, and Atmosphere. These are the characteristics that attract visitors to St John, and which we must protect moving forward.

We should promote these attributes through our media campaigns and public messaging. As more new visitors come to the Caribbean in response to the opening of Cuba, it can be expected that some of those visitors will seek more naturally protected islands with clean beaches and a welcoming culture. This is how St John and our sister islands should be portrayed.

I have little doubt that developers and investors will see Cuba as an opportunity for a new surge in tourism investment – hotels, marinas, golf courses, and the like. If we, here in the Virgin Islands, attempt to compete for those development dollars through tax incentives, land deals, or fast-track permitting we may well find that we've mortgaged our future by selling off the assets which make us unique and attractive to the tourism market. My advice is to focus on our strengths – promote them heavily, and not try to play "catch-up" with an emerging Cuba tourism market.

People will discover and rediscover the Virgin Islands for all of those things that we all love – our history, our people, and our environment. As the saying goes - "a rising tide lifts all boats" – and the rising tide of Caribbean tourism, spurred by the opening of Cuba, should lift our tourism product if we focus on what makes us special.

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