CM BANKS RESPONDS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT ANGUILLA'S AIRPORT

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Chief Minister Victor Banks

Natalie Richardson

Some of the searching questions posed to Chief Minister, Mr. Victor Banks, during the business forum held by the Anguilla Government and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, were asked by Natalie Richardson, a graduate of the University of the Virgin Islands and a popular Anguillian singer.

She asked the following: "You spoke about Dutch St. Maarten's Airport Terminal Building having been destroyed [by Hurricane Irma]. With Anguilla being the most northern Caribbean island, and the closest to Miami, is it not possible for Anguilla to be the main hub for direct flights from Miami instead of going through St. Maarten which tourists are complaining about? Can we not focus on fixing our terminal building [and extending our airport] with everything else in place? I know it will cost a lot of money and is

challenging, but can it be our focus for 2018?"
Chief Minister Banks replied: "We are actively pursuing the airport expansion project. We have already set the ground work for it in one of the projects that we have approved MOUs. We are also including in that project the lands that need to be made available for an extension of the airport…That is enshrined in the project document.

"After Hurricane Irma we were able to extract from the British Government a commitment for the airport expansion of 600 feet. The whole concept of the importance of airport expansion for Anguilla's tourism development was accepted by the British Government.
"Very early in our term, most of us, within Government, felt that the level of expenditure required to put in place the infrastructure for a project like airport expansion, was something that we didn't want to deal with immediately. We thought we probably needed to spend more time creating access from the various hubs within the region – Antigua, St. Maarten and Puerto Rico. But we all later bought into the importance of airport development as investors in the tourism sector saw this as a critical project, and we have been working assiduously on getting it done.

"With the 200 million pounds coming from the British Government, it is possible to get some funds to extend the airport by 600 feet [but] we do not want to do that. What we want is to put a public/private partnership in place and a lot of that work has been done by previous administrations in terms of the ICA Report. The idea of a public/private partnership was flagged by the report which stated how this should progress.
"Subsequently, we have been talking to a number of developers, not only those involved in the Conch Bay project, but other persons as well. One of the important components of that project is the land and, obviously, if ICA and the Conch Bay Development are joint venture partners in this, it is a possibility that we can get them involved – and they have expressed an interest to do that."

Mr. Banks continued: "We are spending the month of January putting in place all that is necessary to get approval from the British Government to pursue the public/private partnership arrangement model. There is a proposal before the Government and we have already engaged a consultancy from the UK which is reviewing the document.
"I have asked that the skills of the new incoming Financial Adviser should be in the area of public/private partnerships arrangement models. The particular suggested consultant has worked in another jurisdiction in public\private partnerships models. Therefore, I think we have a good opportunity and have sold this idea to the British Government. It is something we are pursuing vigorously. The employees in the Ministry of Finance are working on it. We now have a memorandum going to Executive Council to that effect and Mr. Larry Franklin, the Permanent Secretary for Economic Development, has produced a report on the matter. We are focussed on that and the investors in the sector are very encouraged as well. As a matter of fact, one of the first things I am hearing from them is: 'When are you going to have direct access to Anguilla?'"

The Chief Minister also said to Natalie Richardson: “You asked why we can’t be the hub? We can be the hub, but we have to grow that position. First of all, to be a hub, you must have a certain number of tourist rooms so that you can support the travel coming to your jurisdiction.”

Mr. Banks added: “One of the critical issues affecting us right now is the fact that St. Maarten’s tourism plant is down. Therefore, the justification for a number of flights there is not as strong as it should and we in Anguilla have suffered as a result. We have to recognise that unless we can deal with air access issues, unless we can have occasional direct flights from certain metropolitan centres in North America and the UK, we are not going to be really responding to the needs of the industry.”