

Headline: Airport development – 10

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Airport Development 1 dates back to August 1999, just after Sir James publicly announced plans to develop our International Airport at Arnos Vale by extending the existing runway into the sea. Since then, several debates have ensued and the choice of site has oscillated between Kitchen and Argyle, with the final consensus being Argyle the most affordable and value-for money option.

Site Selection

The choice of a site was always central to the debate on airport development. Extending the ET Joshua runway was deemed a non-starter when it was revealed that all of the independent studies commissioned by different Governments over the years pointed away from the proposed Arnos Vale extension towards Kitchen and Argyle.

Quite apart from the overarching safety and capacity issues that would still be present after the extension of the Arnos vale runway, an international airport at Arnos Vale would have created a significant increase in congestion in the greater Kingstown area, the loss of the Sion-Hill Bay beach and high shoreline protection and maintenance costs.

While there were strong arguments in favor of the perfectly aligned Kitchen proposal, the technical experts eventually settled on the Argyle site. The arguments for Argyle were based mainly on the high anticipated coastal protection of the proposed Kitchen runway, the relatively high costs of construction and land acquisition and the anticipated high negative environmental impact at Kitchen.

Design

The design of the Argyle airport is all land-based. The runway is also designed at an alignment that offers the crucial upwind take-off in the North-East direction, from Stubbs towards Peruvian Vale.

At a few times during the year, the NE Trade Winds have been known to shift and come from the east and south-east. During these periods, the winds will blow across the runway rather than down the runway. The experts have advised that while these conditions will not affect the Dash-8s and larger aircraft, the smaller, lighter aircraft may be affected. To cater for this eventuality, the designers have proposed an additional shorter cross-runway in a more easterly direction and at an additional cost of US\$1 million.

The Argyle design also includes the re-routing of the "Argyle Stretch". From the maps and site reconnaissance, there appears to be abundant scope for this re-routing anywhere from Col. Anderson's gap, through a section of the Akers road and exiting at a point close to the new Argyle School.

Cost and Financing Options

The Argyle option was sold by the experts as the least cost option at EC\$500 million. It was also clear to all that, because of the amount of financing required and our high indebtedness, single-source funding would not be available or affordable to the Government of SVG. This therefore left very few financing options.

The present arrangement for financing this project is creative and bold. While the promise by friendly Governments of designs, earthworks and construction materials has an inherent amount of uncertainty, we really have no other choice other than to be optimistic in the interest of national development.

Consultations

The process of valuations and acquisitions has already started and the pre-arranged public consultations have provided the expected forum for homeowners to voice their collective and personal concerns.

Having attended the most recent consultation held on April 10, 2006, it seems clear that the vast majority of the approximately 100 residents have accepted the project in the national interest. The vast majority also seemed willing to relocate within a reasonable time, under the right conditions and when their individual and collective interests are adequately addressed.

Many of the questions and issues posed at the consultations were pertinent and in some instances were designed to elicit some much needed reassurance from the Prime Minister. Four (4) persons voiced their dissatisfaction with the flow of information and the uncertainty in the timing of their eventual relocation. Those persons were also concerned about the final levels of

compensation for their properties. The other five speakers also raised important issues and even proffered valuable suggestions.

Relocations

The relocation issue is a critical one, especially for retirees who may be unable to again undergo the stress of building a new home. Allowances should be made by the Government to assist in this area, including the construction of comparable new homes at a reasonable price. The HLDC could well get its first opportunity to construct middle to high-income houses.

It would also be in the interest of the Government officials to quickly install the Harmony Hall infrastructure, complete with sidewalks et al. The overall efficiency of this process will determine the eventual construction start date. The Government should also vary the selling prices of lots at Harmony Hall (or other state lands), depending on the slope of the land and the expected ease or difficulty of construction.

The Catholic Community is also a key stakeholder and will require special attention with Shrine, Cemetery and Church all in the vicinity.

Valuations

Whatever the eventual formula for valuations and settlement with the homeowners, some of whom are currently paying mortgages; the process must be financially and technically sound and both tested and transparent. Thankfully, this will not be the first time a government will be acquiring property or buildings in the public interest.

Valuations will be made and will be challenged, but ultimately, reasonableness, precedence and market conditions will prevail. Standard practice is that the valuation of a property is usually completed only after consideration of what similar properties are selling for, what it would cost today to replace the property, how much it costs to maintain it and what income the property may produce. The appraiser will also consider the location, the size, the design, the construction materials and their condition etc. If this is what is being proposed at Argyle then the residents can be assured of fairness in this regard.

Optimism

This present airport initiative offers a rare opportunity. If for some reason, the Venezuelan, Mexican, Cuban, Taiwanese support etc. is eventually withdrawn, it should be our hope that, at the very least, we would have already cleared the most important obstacle to airport development in SVG. A suitable site would have been chosen and cleared It would then be left to

future governments to come up with a suitable financing solution to continue this long but very important gestation process.