

Headline: ET Joshua extension is a waste

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By Line: G.E.M Saunders

EDITOR: The recent withdrawal of American Eagle's service to St. Vincent has once again reopened the crucial issue of airport development and the vital role which an airport plays in our economic advancement.

In the absence of the relevant FAA report, some officials will have us believe that the withdrawal was due to the lack of an additional 2000 ft of runway at Arnos Vale. The facts are that Government's consultants, MMM have already indicated in their Final Report, that even after a runway extension of 2000 ft at Arnos Vale, the International Civil Aviation classification "will remain as 3C", the same as it was before the extension and that all existing restrictions on the landing and takeoffs would still have to be maintained.

It's therefore difficult to imagine that the FAA and American Eagle will regard a 2000 ft extension as adequate, given the fact that landings and the ability to abort will only marginally be improved because of the continuing obstructions within the aerodrome. It also means that without that precise explanation from American Eagle or the FAA, we would be clearly and conveniently speculating about a very serious national concern.

We must be reminded that the runway extension had been opposed for several reasons, including adverse social, economic, environmental and planning issues and the lack of opportunities for future expansion. The bottom line reason was that even after spending EC\$200 million we would still not be able to accommodate jets, now or in the future and that takeoff capacity and landing safety were not going to be substantially improved.

These are all the opinions of the experts, taking due consideration of the ICAO and the FAA regulations and standards. There is nothing sinister about the opposition to this extension; the facts and evidence demand this posture. Until we can be guaranteed value for money, EC\$200 million for 2000 ft of runway at Arnos Vale, with all the inherent social and environmental problems will continue to be a poor

investment decision.

We are also told that “we do not have the financial capacity to undertake an international airport at this time”, hence the ET Joshua extension is the only viable option in the short-term. Well, in the first place no one is recommending an international airport at Argyle or Kitchen, and if Arnos Vale is the short-term option, what is the long-term option? Are we really planning for future Vincentian generations?

If we look at the cost comparisons in Table 5.1 of the consultant’s Final Report we see that the development cost of a safe, flexible 5500 ft alternative at Argyle as US\$77.6 million versus US\$86.6 for the ET Joshua extension. Some subsequent and convenient refinements of the ET Joshua’s cost estimate now puts that cost at around US\$70 million.

It therefore begs the question that if we are confident about funding for \$70 million at Arnos Vale, why not \$80 million at a much safer and flexible Argyle or Kitchen? Is there a magical threshold between \$70 million and \$100 million above which our Government cannot or will not source funding?

The claim that five (5) years of wind studies is needed at Argyle is quite baffling when we consider that these studies are needed in order to determine the need for a cross-runway. The estimated cost of this runway is US\$0.7 million. When we allow for the consultants fees for five years, the equipment cost and the fact that there is every likelihood that crosswinds will be a factor, are we not better off constructing the runway in the first place?

Acquisitions at Argyle could pose implementation problems because of the possibility of delays, coordination and scheduling, but surely, there are procedures and options. We can expect to encounter similar problems at any site that is to be acquired. The point is that although the acquisitions at Argyle could be a difficult undertaking, success here will also depend on how well the project is “sold” to the residents, their own disposition and their response to the opportunity to swap their lands for prime commercial lands at Arnos Vale.

Even if it were impossible to acquire the lands at Argyle, that is surely no license to throw away EC\$200 million of our taxpayer’s funds at Arnos Vale. We still have the Kitchen site which has the advantage of having the best alignment, fewer acquisitions, the best potential for swapping of commercial lands at Arnos Vale and the fact that construction can take place almost unnoticed and will inconvenience only a few. I have always maintained that the costs at this site are very conservative and may be grossly overstate; further investigation there is crucial.

What is now needed, in the short-term, is an immediate upgrade of the ET Joshua terminal and tower and a simultaneous expansion of the apron area and available services. We must also seek to improve links from the USA into St. Vincent, via our more fortunate neighbours.

We should also put in place immediately, a system for directly tracking and recording visitor arrivals from the USA via the other airlines. An assessment of prior years' figures for the same period will tell us how much of a negative impact the American Eagle withdrawal would have produced.

We must also begin immediately to regulate developments at both Argyle and Kitchen and also commence data collection at those sites. It has been almost two years since this recent discourse on airport development began and to date we have not even attempted to collect one bit of additional data. This data, which can be collected over the next two (2) years would certainly help to refine the crude estimates now being thrown around and would prove crucial to our final decision.