

Headline: Revive Airport development

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EDITOR: Now that the proposed EC\$150 million extension of the ET Joshua runway, with all its inherent difficulties and hidden costs, has been brought to a halt, the time is now right to revive and review the issue of airport development in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

It is important for us to recall that the advice from all the consultants and experts was that while the proposed extension at Arnos Vale will improve safety for all passenger aircraft currently using the airport, no other significant benefits could be derived.

We were told that even with the proposed extension, the next largest size of aircraft operating within the region and beyond, would only be able to takeoff at 60 percent capacity because of the continuing obstructions and the downwind takeoff, thus rendering St. Vincent an uneconomical destination for larger capacity aircraft.

This essentially meant that the desired direct linkages to North America and Europe would be unattained. There were also a myriad of environmental, planning, social and economic problems associated with the proposed extension.

However, Sir James Mitchell was correct in assigning priority to airport development. There were a few voices who felt that we should not go for the construction of a larger size (international) airport just because the other islands were developing their airports. While in theory that may sound like good advice, the reality is that we now find ourselves having to do just that.

With the current opening up of markets and the gradual disappearance of preferential treatment, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, without an international airport, will not be in a position to compete with even the smallest and poorest of nations in our part of the world.

An airport capable of handling 120 seater aircraft with international connections must now be considered a necessity for St. Vincent and the Grenadines, if only because all our neighbours and competitors have developed this capacity. At least twenty-eight (28) airports throughout the region have undergone expansion during the past year and this kind of airport development work is expected to continue in 2002.

This means that we limit the talking and writing and begin the studies and the process of data collection on all of the sites. Just as large Companies invest heavily in research and development when considering new business or products, so too must all Governments who contemplate spending in excess of \$200 million dollars on one infrastructure project.

This latest round of discussions on airport development began back in July of 1999 and almost three years later we have not measured one gust of wind at Argyle, nor have we sounded one depth at Kitchen. In the mean time the housing stock in these areas continues to increase significantly in number and value. We simply cannot afford another long period of inaction; we must commence the studies so that we can better consider and evaluate all our options.

One such option which may be worth considering is the Canouan option. Could we extend the Canouan runway at a much lower cost than Kitchen and Argyle? Could we find financiers in current and potential operators on the island? Could there be a viable shuttle Dash-8 service between Canouan and the mainland?

The answer to all of the above questions may well be negative, but surely, they are worth asking. The alternative to this approach, is what we have become very good at, that is simply to do nothing and allow the development gap between us and the rest of the world to continue to widen.