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Royal Caribbean Tells USVI Businesses It's Ready to Sail At Governor's Second Community Business Forum

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS — Royal Caribbean is asking V.I. businesses to be prepared for the cruise line's return to the Territory.

At Wednesday's Community Business Forum — sponsored by the Office of Governor Albert Bryan Jr. — The Royal Caribbean Group said with its new protocols that include requiring passengers and crew to be vaccinated before sailing, it is ready to return the U.S. Virgin Islands immediately after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lifts its conditional "No Sail" order.

"The USVI is one of the most popular destinations that we sail to, and our guests will be looking forward to returning just as much as we are," said Jayne Halcomb, Royal Caribbean's Destination Development Director for the Americas and Caribbean. "We are eager to get back there and we are confident that with the progress and success of the (COVID) vaccine and our track record operating safely, that we will be back to the U.S. Virgin Islands."

The Community Business Forum series is an initiative of the Office of the Governor, the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority and the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism, in partnership with Royal Caribbean Group and designed to help the USVI business community rebuild and prepare for the restart of cruise calls.

During the forum, Virgin Islands Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said her department is about to launch a "Healthy Certification" program that recognizes local businesses that have maintained CDC and Virgin Islands Department of Health COVID-19 guidance and practices to protect its employees and patrons.

V.I. Port Authority Assistant Executive Director Damian Cartwright discussed the authority's two-port incentive, which would offer a significant discount on passenger fees for itineraries to St. Croix.

"The reason we have a much lower tariff in St. Croix is because we continue to work with Tourism and cruise line partners to promote cruise traffic, focusing intensively and extensively on driving cruise traffic into the St. Croix District," Assistant Director Cartwright said.

Royal Caribbean's imminent return to the USVI drove the discussion of the second Community Business Forum.

Ms. Halcomb opened her presentation with a major announcement that Celebrity Millennium, Adventure and Vision of the Seas will set sail from St. Maarten, the Bahamas and Bermuda respectively this summer. It's an

opportunity for the cruise giant to exercise its new “Healthy Return to Service” protocols to ensure its cruise ships are ready to return to the Territory.

To prepare for its return to service, Royal Caribbean gathered a panel of health experts to develop protocols for onboarding and for arrival and disembarking at destinations. This summer, Royal Caribbean Group will begin requiring that their guests and crew receive a COVID-19 vaccine before boarding, Ms. Halcomb said.

“As we start sailing in June, we feel the strongest approach to protecting our crew, our guests and the communities that we are going to visit, is for all of those guests and crew to be fully vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus,” she said. “Guests under the age of 18 will require a negative PCR test prior to boarding.”

Royal Caribbean will roll out its fleet with limited guest capacity of about 50 percent while it works toward full guest capacity by 2022, Ms. Halcomb said.

Addressing specifics of returning to the Virgin Islands, Royal Caribbean Group executives participating in Wednesday’s Community Business Forum said they are looking to local providers to help create a bubble experience, providing services in smaller group settings, and for off-the-beaten-path excursions.

“It’s going to be really critical for all of you to adapt as well, as things change, as we evolve and as we learn more and start bringing our guests back to the U.S. Virgin Islands,” Ms. Halcomb said. “With that excitement comes a higher expectation and, as a result, we need to work together to improve the performance quality, especially in St. Croix, so they feel just as excited about going back as they did about going.”

Royal Caribbean is inviting VI providers to offer feedback on existing tours and new tourism activities and opportunities that will enhance cruise passengers’ experiences.

The cruise line is also working closely with the Government of the Virgin Islands to improve the Territory’s ports to accommodate Royal Caribbean’s larger-class ships. Ms. Halcomb noted that St. Croix has significant potential for cruise tourism growth if its berth is expanded to accommodate the larger vessels.

V.I. business owners or potential business owners can send feedback, ideas and suggestions for Royal Caribbean directly to Melissa De La Cruz at mdelacruz@rccl.com or Daniella Cardenas at daniellacardenas@rccl.com.

“We are grateful to Royal Caribbean for partnering with us to begin the conversation now about being ready for their return, hopefully in 2021,” said David Bornn, Chief Legal Counsel for the Office of the Governor, who created the Community Business Forum initiative. “Royal Caribbean’s return will require many of our businesses to reinvent the way they operate, and the Bryan-Roach Administration is committed to rebuilding our business community and providing resources and support to help them adapt and innovate.”

The next session of the Community Business Forum series will be held in April. For more information, visit www.vi.gov/cbf.

The Bryan-Roach Administration is committed to transparency, stabilizing the economy, restoring trust in the government and ensuring the disaster recovery is completed as quickly as possible.

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