

**CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME REMARKS**  
**SYMPOSIUM FOR AIRLINE OPERATORS/MANAGERS**  
**ARGYLE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT PROJECT**

**by**

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**Chairman of IADC**

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**Methodist Church Hall, Kingstown**

**Airport development on mainland St Vincent**

Today marks the beginning of a courtship, between two soul mates, our airport and your airline.

For this country to achieve the high rates of growth that are needed to eliminate poverty quickly, we need airport infrastructure that complements, and facilitates, the growth of our tourism sector, and that provides our businesses with, if not competitive advantage, certainly, a level playing field with their competitors abroad.

Though it might be hard for some to imagine, I am certain that there was a time when the E.T. Joshua Airport at Arnos Vale was adequate to our developmental needs.

But, I am certain too, that that time has long past. E.T. Joshua does not do it for us anymore.

Most of us have experienced considerable inconvenience, having to overnight, or hang around at one or another of the regional airports, waiting for connecting flights to our destinations.

We need not be rocket scientists to recognise, that only persons who are highly motivated to come to St Vincent, would put up with the myriad of problems faced in coming here.

In fact, many of us who live here have to mentally prepare ourselves for our voyages in and out!

So I know our airline representatives who came in from abroad are highly motivated to be here.

And I welcome you.

Although we should not need it, there is ample survey evidence to show that our poor air access has placed St. Vincent and the Grenadines at a competitive disadvantage for the tourist business with our neighbours in the Caribbean.

These air access problems have been negating the enthusiastic promotional work done by the Ministry of Tourism, and the business facilitation and support services provided to potential investors by the government, and in particular, our National Investment Promotions agency.

But even with all of these problems, there is still vigorous interest in St. Vincent and the Grenadines as a tourist destination.

Like many before them, investors have come to recognise the potential, of the “Gem of the Antilles” and the “Jewels of the Caribbean”. When they come here, it is hard for them to leave!

Investor interest in our country has been evidenced by large amounts of direct investment in our tourism product, expanding the stock of rooms available.

No responsible government, can recognise our air access problems, and the level of investment made in our tourism industry, and do nothing about our airport.

### ***The need for a new international airport***

Having studied and understood our problem, this government went about fixing it.

Some argued for an improvement to the E.T. Joshua Airport, even in the face of technical evidence that showed, convincingly, that E.T. Joshua’s development was severely constrained, both in terms of the width and length of the runway, and would be an uneconomical investment.

There are also several natural obstacles at Arnos Vale that cannot be eliminated.

The technical studies, however, recommended two alternative sites on mainland St Vincent: one at an area called Kitchen (on the South Eastern side of St Vincent), and the other at Argyle (on the Eastern side of the country). Both sites could accommodate an airstrip of 3,000 metres.

On August 8<sup>th</sup> 2005, in this same room, the Hon Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves announced his government's decision to build a new international airport at Argyle.

With that announcement, we embarked on a journey, that has taken us to this point today.

The Argyle International Airport is being built on 375 acres of land, with a paved runway 2,743 metres (9,000 feet) long, and 45 metres (150 feet) wide. The airport is designed to accommodate jets as large as the Boeing 747-400s.

The terminal building, which is at a pre-design stage, will have about 5,000 square metres (53,820 square feet) of floor space, to handle about one million passengers per year.

The financing of this considerable investment is a reflection of the agility of our minds, the hard work of our leaders, the enduring international friendships we have built, and the astute use of foreign policy!

These traits have allowed our country to benefit from grant funds and pledges from a diverse group of friendly countries, including the Republic of Cuba, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Austria, Malaysia, Turkey and Iran.

Our government has been so successful in attracting grant funding for this project, that its own contribution to this US\$216 million project, might not exceed 30 percent of the project cost.

This country will forever remain grateful to our coalition partners, who have so wonderfully come to our assistance, in financing this most important infrastructural project.

On August 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, we commenced earthworks on the airport. At present, the work team, comprising Vincentians and Cubans (we called them the Chatoyer-Che Contingent) have been working on the first kilometre of the runway, clearing and grubbing the area, demolishing the abandoned structures on the site, and removing the top soil.

In the second session today, our engineers will provide full technical details of the work being done at Argyle.

***Forging strategic partnerships for development***

It is clear that our continued development demands an investment in this kind of infrastructure.

Although the airport should be seen, first and foremost, as an economic developmental project, we do intend to manage the airport, not simply as a public good, but rather as a business.

We will do so to ensure that the country achieves maximum benefit from the investment made by our government and our friendly donor countries.

As a business, we will work closely with both passenger and cargo airlines to develop and maintain a positive long-term partnership in the use of this facility.

We recognise that airlines are now operating in a much more cost-conscious and competitive environment, and that their interests would naturally be to ensure that our airport is efficiently managed, so that the user charges levied on their business is as low as possible.

As your partner in this enterprise, we would do our part to generate revenues from non-aeronautical sources, so that our aeronautical fees are kept as low as they can possibly be.

This will not only reduce your cost of operation, but would also position the Argyle International Airport as the preferred hub, from which your airline can operate most profitably.

We also recognise that the cost of operation is only one of the important concerns to your airline. The quality of service rendered to passengers is also of importance to all of us.

During the last month, we have been visiting regional airports, to learn from them about their airport design and operational experiences.

For example, late last month we visited the improved airport at Montego Bay, Jamaica. We then flew to the Bahamas and discussed with them their plans for a completely new terminal building costing US\$400 million. Last Saturday, we returned from Trinidad, which has recently rebuilt its terminal building and are in the process of making some modifications to their facilities. And later this month, we will travel to Atlanta Airport in Georgia (considered to be one of the most efficient airports in the USA), and to Panama, and Mexico, as part of our information gathering.

All of our travels has one fundamental objective: We wish to learn as much as we possibly can from other airports, about their design and operations, so that we avoid costly errors in the design and construction of our terminal building and landside facilities.

We have only one opportunity to do ours right; we are not wealthy enough to correct big mistakes afterwards.

We intend to build an efficient airport. We are now also learning about the seemingly small things that really matter to passengers: Things such as being able to find their way in the airport, getting adequate information about flights, being able to hear the public announce system clearly, having access to baggage trolleys, the courtesy of airport staff, among a host of other things.

We are excited by the opportunities that are before us as a small developing nation.

I am delighted, that as Airline Operators, Managers and citizens interested in our development, you have accepted our invitation to come to hear about our prospects for development and to participate in this symposium.

Our government believes in consultations of this kind; we believe that there is much that we can learn from you.

Let us commit ourselves today, to forging a long-term mutually beneficial partnering relationship, by working together, to ensure that the airport facilities are designed to best suit your operational needs, your customers need for quality service, and the longterm needs of our country.

Let us cooperate, and build this enterprise, for our mutual benefit.

Today we begin a courtship; And as a bride in waiting, I expect by 2011, for us to tie the knot!

Again, welcome to this symposium.

And to our guests from overseas: Welcome to “The Caribbean you have been looking for!”



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