

# Gov., EDA officials meet with site selection consultants in Atlanta

ST. CROIX — Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority officials, while in Atlanta for the USVI Economic Development Summit last week, meet with site selection consultants based in the area, according to a Government House statement.

Gov. John de Jongh, Jr. along with top officials from the EDA participated in the two-day summit hosted by the USVI Alliance that brought together Virgin Islanders from academic, industry and government sectors to collaborate on economic development strategies.

"Atlanta is a prime market for the U.S. Virgin Islands to deliver its message of a place of promise, opportunity and prosperity," de Jongh said. "Many executives within the tax community have heard of the USVI's unique tax incentive programs, but this seminar gave them the chance to learn in more depth how the USVI can help the businesses they advise."

Additionally, the EDA hosted a tax benefits seminar and reception for more than 20 targeted tax and personal wealth management advisors, according to the statement.

Led by a presentation from the governor, the tax benefits seminar was delivered to a standing-room-only crowd. The seminar also included remarks by EDA Assistant CEO and COO Jennifer Nugent-Hill; insight from the governor's legal counsel, Nagesh



Submitted Photo

Gov. John de Jongh Jr. takes a question from the audience during his presentation at a tax benefits seminar and reception in Atlanta last week.

Tammara; a company testimonial from Timothy Hayes, executive vice president of Ocwen Mortgage Servicing Inc.; and a call-to-action by Labor Commissioner Albert

Bryan, who is also chair of the EDA governing board, the statement said.

During the summit, the EDA delegation also participated in the

"Building an Economic Ecosystem" panel, which educated summit attendees on the Economic Development Commission tax incentive program. De Jongh

delivered the summit's keynote address, noting how the VI's diversification of industries will lead to economic success in years to come.

## Taxi driver fined after refusing disabled customer with service animal

TOM EADER

Bureau Chief

ST. CROIX — A St. Thomas taxi driver was recently fined and ordered to pay a damage award after refusing to give service to a disabled customer who was accompanied by a service animal, the U.S. Department of Justice announced Tuesday.

Altigracia Roumou, who operates a safari taxi, signed an agreement resolving allegations that she violated the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by refusing taxi service to an individual on the basis of his disability, the release stated. The settlement agreement concludes an investigation which began in March 2013 when Zane Birnie filed a complaint with the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Birnie, a young man who is visually impaired, alleged in his complaint that Roumou refused to give him a ride on her safari taxi because he was accompanied by his service animal.

Roumou paid a \$1,000 damage award to Birnie as part of the terms of the settlement agree-

ment. She also will pay a \$1,000 civil penalty to the United States. She agreed not to discriminate against any individual on the basis of disability in the full and equal enjoyment of taxicab services, and to provide service to anyone with a disability, including those accompanied by a service animal. Roumou also agreed to adopt a Department of Justice-approved service animal policy and undergo training on providing service to people with disabilities.

On St. Thomas, privately-owned safari taxis, acting as a supplement to mass transit, transport thousands of commuters from the Red Hook ferry terminal to the University of the Virgin Islands, through the town of Charlotte Amalie. Other safaris operate exclusively with cruise ship passengers, taking them on island tours and to shopping destinations.

Taxi Commission Director Judy Wheatley says getting safaris to comply will be a challenge.

"The greatest challenge are the dollar safaris. Many (drivers) are unable to communicate in Eng-

lish, and don't understand the laws and rules that govern their business. Dollar safaris are registered taxis providing public transportation along the bus route. They are regulated by the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission. The law is the law. They are operating a vehicle that has been licensed and registered to conduct their transportation business," Wheatley said.

The U.S. Attorney's Office will be offering ADA training to workers in the taxi industry, in conjunction with the Disability Rights Center of the Virgin Islands and the Virgin Islands Taxicab Commission, the release stated. The settlement agreement is part of a broader effort by the U.S. Attorney's Office to enforce the ADA and to educate the public about the ADA's requirements.

"This settlement exemplifies the U.S. Attorney's Office commitment to protecting the civil rights of all Virgin Islanders, including those with disabilities," U.S. Attorney Ronald Sharpe said in a prepared statement.

The ADA requires that trans-

portation providers, including private taxis and public transportation, allow people with disabilities who use service animals to travel with their service animals, even if the transportation provider has a "no pets" policy.

Wheatley pointed out that members of the VI Taxi Association, specialized vans and jitneys have been used to accommodate the disabled, equipped with wheelchair lifts. They have even developed a safari that can accommodate wheelchairs, she said.

And if a service animal must accompany a passenger, the driver, in compliance with the law, has to provide transportation to them both, Wheatley said.

"One of the requirements with the VIPA franchise agreements, the organizations at the port facilities are required to provide vehicles equipped for persons with special needs," she said.

St. John does not currently have taxis that can accommodate the disabled, but Wheatley said members of the St. John Taxi Association are encouraged to add those services to their business

plan. The island does, however, offer Dial A Ride Service through a nonprofit organization that can assist the disabled.

Both St. Thomas and St. John also offer VITRAN ADA bus service where registered passengers receive door-to-door service in specially-designed passenger vans.

St. Croix has some accommodation for disabled riders in their taxi fleet, Wheatley said, but on a limited basis.

The ADA prohibits public and private entities from discriminating against persons with disabilities, the release stated. Under the ADA, state and local governments, businesses and nonprofit organizations that serve the public generally must allow service animals to accompany people with disabilities in all areas of the facility where the public is normally allowed, including restaurants, movie theaters, stores, hospitals, doctors' offices and fairs.

This case was handled by Assistant U.S. Attorney Noah Sacks.

— Reporter Judi Shimel contributed to this article.