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Caribbean spruce-up

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Client:

Virgin Islands Public Finance Authority, St. Thomas Virgin Islands

Designer/Builder:

Coastal Systems Development, Inc., Coral Gables, Fla.

The Frederiksted Revitalization Project provides an inviting entrance to the St. Croix port city that will entice visitors to venture away from the pier into the historic town. A meandering path leads from Verne I Richards Veterans Park toward the Eliza McBean Clock Tower and beyond. (All photos courtesy Coastal Systems Development)

FREDERIKSTED, Virgin Islands -

This port city on St. Croix, the largest of three islands that make up the United States Virgin Islands, may have a past that dates back hundreds of years, but with the turn of the century its future was seriously in doubt.

Now, as work wraps up on the first phase of a two-pronged community revitalization project, officials are optimistic that the cruise ships - which at one point contributed an estimated \$50 million annually to the St. Croix economy - will be back.

The key: upgrading important components of Frederiksted's tourist-related infrastructure while maintaining its historic good looks. And, it's a job for natural stone.

Kenneth Mapp director of finance and administration for the U.S.

Virgin Islands Finance Authority says cruise-ship visits to St. Croix had declined over several years, starting in the 1990s.

"The business community became concerned, and then the governor, Charles Kimble, (who is also chairman of the finance authority) asked us to meet with the community in meaningful way and discuss the issues," says Mapp.

From discussion with the cruise-ship lines, Mapp says officials were aware that their passengers were concerned about the "shallowness" of the experience on St. Croix and the lack of diversified activities.

"The overall result showed that St. Croix was not an exciting port," he says.

When concerns were initially

raised about the cruise-ship experience, Mapp adds that a Florida-based cruise association has suggested officials contact Coral Gables, Fla.-based Coastal Development Systems, Inc.

“They had worked with the cruise lines on a number of destinations in the Bahamian chain helping to build out those islands,” Mapp says. “We met with them at that time and had a good discussion, and they had a clear understanding of some of the things you need to do to improve the visitor experience for the cruise industry.”

The Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks drove another large nail into the coffin of cruise-ship visits to St. Croix. The following year, with direction from the governor

and business leaders, the U.S.V.I. Finance Authority went ahead with a major project to help revitalize Frederiksted.

Mapp says rather than work from the top down, the decision was made to start the process by bringing together various entities concerned with different aspects of the community in a lengthy design meeting, which took place in Frederiksted in October 2002.

By that time, the finance authority had contracted with Coastal Development Systems, and both Mapp and Coastal's president, Harvey Sasso, say the five-day session was designed to get input from a broad spectrum of the public.

“There were so many not-for-

profits and business organizations, as well as individual citizens who had been working for a number of years to rebuild Frederiksted that we didn't want to just bring in a firm with an idea and then implement it,” says Mapp.

“They're very effective on a couple fronts,” says Sasso of the intensive planning workshops. “One is that you get community feedback, so you know what's important to the people, and you understand what the community is trying to achieve. And, even if a planner has a good project, sometimes it can be misinterpreted as being something thrown on the community, and then you don't get the political support and the financial support you need.”

Improvements to the shoreline include a new, tiled seawall for Veterans Park, with new concrete bollards with limestone caps along the top.





Plenty of new chipped-edge pavers in Sienna Gold from Turkey and additional landscaping are utilized to draw tourists to the clock tower.

Based on community feedback, Sasso says it became obvious the number one need was to upgrade the waterfront park - with its memorial to local veterans - and pier.

“It was seen as a real catalyst bring the cruise ships back,” he says.

“There aren’t many cruise-ship piers in the Caribbean where you can get off the ship and walk through a garden into an historical town.”

By creating a beautiful arrival spot, the feeling was that it would improve the experience for the arriving passengers and also stimulate future conversations about the community among their friends.

Once the visitors leave the waterfront area, it was felt that it would also be critical to upgrade the amenities of the community’s main thoroughfare, Strand Street. The final component of the first phase of what became the Frederiksted Economic Revitalization Project is an upgrade to the Vincent Mason Pool, in earlier times offered visitors another local experience.

“The cruise lines would bus their passengers there and have picnics and barbecues,” says Mapp. “However, it had fallen into disrepair, and we wanted it completely restored.”



The Turkish limestone extended into planters to provide additional greenery around this kiosk, designed to provide visitors and residents a view of the ocean.

To complete the first phase of the project, the finance authority entered into a design-build contract with Coastal. At the same time, Mapp says that agency also committed funds for historic restoration of public buildings in Frederiksted, and to some repairs and improvements to the Danish-built Fort Frederik that adjoins the park.

Sasso says he doesn't believe the project could have been done as a design-bid-build one, based on the location and the need to do a quality job throughout.

"It's not a project where you could go out and hire a number of subs and sub out the pieces, the Coastal president says. "In many cases, we had to self-perform the project, and at its peak we had about 70 local workers on our payroll. We were taking semi-skilled workers and showing them how we wanted it done."

To do that, Sasso says Coastal put a number of executives on the site, including a superintendent senior/junior

project managers. A separate project foreman was brought in to oversee the concrete work.

However by doing a design-build project, Sasso says he was able to emphasize quality. In a bid situation, he says, it would have been tempting to do more value engineering that the client might have approved.

"For instance, it would have been cheaper to put stamped concrete—rather than tile—on the face of the seawall, or concrete bollards without stone caps," he says. "But, it would have cheapened the project and it would have been a different project."

Not that there isn't plenty of concrete in the project. Concrete serves as the base for the driveways and the pier, and colored concrete with crushed shells makes up some walkways.

"We put just about everything on concrete for fear of hurricane surges," says Sasso. "We have to anticipate there'll be a storm surge coming over the pier and

into the park at some point, and if we'd put it a sand base, there's the potential for everything to wash out."

However, topping the concrete along the driveways and the pier is a mix



A newly paved sidewalk and new street improve the look of Frederiksted's main commercial thoroughfare, Strand1 Street.

While new stone provided a fresh face for Frederiksted, much of the work was more than cosmetic. The top photo shows work continuing on the marine facility, while the bottom reveals the job of putting utilities below ground-level on Strand Street. A late decision to move the utilities pushed the completion back by a couple months.





The area leading up to the customs house also received new pavers. Along with the revitalization project, several public buildings in Frederiksted including the customs house - have been spruced up.

of Sienna Gold limestone from Turkey and Carolina limestone from the Dominican Republic. The two stones are used mainly as paves, although the Carolina limestone is also utilized in more-decorative ways.

“One of the reasons we could be a little more-cost-effective is that I went to the factory personally to see the capabilities of the Dominican manufacturer,” says Sasso. “We didn’t buy from a supplier in Miami; we bought it from the source. We also had our purchasing agent down there on three different occasions to explain how we wanted the caps on the bollards and the caps on the gates.”

Sasso describes the supplier as a smaller manufacturer who had to buy additional equipment to fill the order, which also included cutting limestone pots from individual pieces of his stone, and pavers in 8" X 16" X 3" and 4" X 4" X 3" sizes for the pier.

“Had we gone through a supplier, our acquisition costs would probably have been two- or three-times higher,” he says. “As a designer-builder, our strategy is to go wherever we need to go to buy the right materials, and do it cost-effec-

tively because we make the effort to find the right manufacturers.”

Sasso adds that the project had a similar relationship with the Turkish supplier who provided pavers in 8" X 16" X 2" and 4" X 4" X 2" sizes.

“The walkways and the driveways use the Sienna Gold with chipped edges,” he says. “In the main square we used the larger 2" -thick stones, but we felt we needed the 3" stone for the heavy traffic out on the pier.”

Actual construction of the first phase of the project began in May 2004 and was scheduled for completion in late 2005. However, because of weather and a later decision to put utilities underground, work is continuing into early this year, the finance authority’s Mapp says. As of January, he called the work 85 percent complete.

In the meantime, a second planning session for the second phase of the project was held last September, and both Mapp and Sasso expect work on that part of the project - which includes improvements to the baseball stadium and park and the development of a cultural center, as well as addressing some major

drainage issues through the construction of a canal - to begin later this year.

Sasso says the first phase of the project has already brought a lot of private dollars into Frederiksted, as well, and the second phase will offer some opportunities for public-private partnerships that should go a long way toward fully revitalizing the town.

“Ken Mapp is a pretty visionary guy and he’s taken a chance with this, but I think so far it’s playing out,” Says Sasso. “The cruise lines are now coming in on a regular basis to refuel, but I think in the next two years, we’re going to see some pretty heavy cruise ship visitation coming back. My hope is that by the end of phase two the town will have its own momentum.”

“There are a whole lot of people involved in luring the cruise lines back, but this is helping tremendously,” says Mapp. “When people come off the ships the park is now a wonderful place to be, to sit, to walk and to eat lunch.

“We’re doing other things, and we’re just making this a wonderful place to visit.” ■