

Focus on Tobago sea transport

As citizens of this twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago, we are all aware that although the islands form one sovereign state, there exists two distinct cultures and landscapes. However, there still remain significant interdependencies between the two islands, and this gives rise to important issues that must be addressed.

One of the key areas – perhaps THE key area – that can affect business and tourist activity in Tobago is the bridge between the islands. While there may not be a physical bridge, the islands, which remain separated by 22 miles of water, are ‘bridged’ by sea and air transport.

Quite often, there is an outcry about one or the other, but progress over the years has been slow in happening. However, any problems with these forms of transport have the ability to significantly impact the economy and even day-to-day operations in Tobago.

Focusing today on the inter-island ferry service, there have always been issues, but in recent times these have reached what the Tobagonian

business community feels are critical proportions. For example, reliability is not a given on the inter-island ferry service. While we cannot say for a fact what are the reasons for this, simple observation shows that at present there exists a situation where the M/V Warrior Spirit, which is the main vehicle for moving trucks and containerised cargo, is due for repairs to its engine and other parts, and will therefore need to go on dry-dock for an extended period.

Along with the drop in speed, its weekly schedule was also cut in half, and this has had a devastating effect, as Tobago businesses already operate under a limit of roughly a fortnight's supply of food and other important goods.

Construction is another area that is hard hit due to the limitations of the sea transport. Materials such as cement, bricks, lumber and similar inputs to this industry also jostle for cargo space on the ferry. Consequently, hardwares retailing goods can run dry. In addition to

limited transport, there is already insufficient storage capacity, which stymies any increased transport efforts.

To further compound matters, with the limitations of the Scarborough port itself, when a cruise ship docks, its presence hampers offload, and further delays and attendant costs are incurred.

What is clearly needed is an upgraded Scarborough port, with facilities and machinery to adequately facilitate tourism, cargo and travel between both islands to transact business.

In the Chamber's opinion, and particularly speaking from the Tobago Division's perspective, what is needed is to treat the sea bridge with the urgency it deserves; recognise its importance and make it an integral part of the national development plan. This will necessitate far more than policy plans – it will necessitate maintaining the cargo and passenger boats in –shipshape and run them reliably.

Once that is done, funds should be allocated on a permanent basis to ensure a proper system is engaged.

These are all recommendations that the Tobago Division has, repeatedly, shared with the authorities as we work with them to develop regular, reliable sea transport. This can only enhance commercial activity in Tobago and will be a major step towards making Tobago a full partner of our twin-island state.