
MEDIA RELEASE

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THE TOBAGO SEA-BRIDGE

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce (TTCIC) is extremely concerned by what is now an almost-total collapse of the ferry service between the two islands.

Though we are disappointed by the length of time the inter-island transport issue has lingered, under such trying circumstances, we must again commend Caribbean Airlines for its yeoman's service in picking up the slack.

The current situation – which The TTCIC Tobago Division tried to prevent from happening since December 2015 – has not come about suddenly; rather, it has been a steady decline. It is abundantly clear that there was an absence of any short- or medium-term planning surrounding the entire inter-island ferry service.

The contingency measures that have been put in place pending the arrival of the Galleon's Passage are inadequate to alleviate the current situation. While the people of Trinidad and Tobago are desperate for any working ferry and welcome the arrival of the Galleon's Passage, the acquisition of this vessel is a retrograde step for Tobago, especially in light of recent issues with the two fast ferries, which have further exacerbated the situation.

With speeds similar to those of the Cabo Star, this new ferry will do nothing to recapture the level of efficiency that the fast ferries afforded to those wanting to travel between Trinidad and Tobago for one-day business trips. The Galleon's Passage may be helpful to ease the immediate calamity with the inter-island ferry service, but – unless it is part of a cohesive strategy – it is not an ideal long-term solution to the inter-island transportation issue.

There has been some discussion about a Toco Port, as well as an assumption that the two fast ferries will soon be operational and that the Galleon's Passage will augment their service along with a proposed replacement for the Cabo Star. However, without constructive engagement with key stakeholders, we are unsure if there is a commitment to a long-term plan for the sea bridge.

The lack of a reliable inter-island transport service adversely affects Tobago's economic health by taking a huge bite out of the tourism sector. Without a solid air and sea bridge working in tandem, promoting Tobago as a vacation destination is difficult, and puts off both domestic tourists and already scarce international travellers.

Feedback from the T&T Chamber's Tobago Division is that a number of businesses have been forced to close over the past year due to a combination of issues, including:

1. Reduced tourist arrivals (both foreign and domestic) because of unreliable inter-island transport
2. Lower demand for goods and services due to reduced tourist arrivals
3. Inability to access supplies from Trinidad on a timely basis

While Tobago's population has been most severely affected, the entire country and the national economy have also been feeling the backlash. The negative ripple effects are reaching not simply Tobago's tourism sector, but also cottage industries, manufacturers and distributors across the nation, threatening livelihoods in both islands. Still, Tobago has borne the brunt of the blow – and the matter of compensation for the Tobago-based businesses that have suffered due to the lack of this essential transport service, needs to be considered.

Based on the historical performance and maintenance of the ferries, we are concerned about the overall management of the Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (PATT). We need to get serious about putting in place long-term institutional solutions. Without them, we will be jumping from one ad-hoc response to the next, as demonstrated by the recent involvement of the National Infrastructure Development Company (NIDCO) and the Minister of Finance in the recent ferry acquisition. We hope that the decision makers involved in the inter-island transport service issue will seek open and honest engagement with the relevant stakeholders, who long to see more transparency and accountability in both the process and the outcome.

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