



PRESS RELEASE – Sunday 15th August 2021

On Thursday 12th August 2021, following the request of the President of The St Kitts Nevis Chamber of Industry & Commerce, The Prime Minister, Minister of Tourism, Minister of Trade and Commerce et al., Minister of Health et al., Government Officials, The Attorney General, and CMO Dr. Hazel Laws met to dialogue with the SKNCIC contingent of directors and members of its Tourism Reopening Liaison Committee.

The purpose of the meeting was to obtain clarity regarding the Government's position on the cruise industry and its future following the recent cancellation of 10 cruise port calls to St. Kitts due to a change in the testing requirements for cruise ships homeporting in USA ports and the position of the St Kitts Nevis COVID-19 Task Force on PCR testing vs. Antigen or Rapid test.

The Chamber acknowledges the risk associated with the accuracy of the antigen testing; however, due to the nature of the cruise sector, the turnaround of PCR testing is not a practical and realistic tool for the cruise industry. St Kitts & Nevis boasts one of the highest vaccination rates in the region, has implemented a requirement for all frontline tourism stakeholders to be vaccinated in order to work, and has a rigid bubble tour policy in the short-term, putting St Kitts & Nevis in a favourable position to resume the cruise sector.

The Chamber recognizes the pain and suffering of the people of St Kitts & Nevis due to the loss of the vibrant cruise industry. Without, and until there is development and delivery of a new national strategy for long-term economic diversification, it is in the Federation's best interest to protect and restart this pillar industry and empower our people to provide for their families once again. We cannot remain reliant on Government stimulus and private charities, which are not sustainable.

COVID-19 and its variants will be with us into the foreseeable future. Tourism is the primary driver of our economy, with cruise tourism representing approximately 85% of our annual visitor arrivals. We must learn to adapt and coexist in this new environment and reality, as many other tourism destinations are doing. The economy is not in a position to withstand the loss of a second consecutive tourism high season.

The Chamber urges the Government to consider the following:

- Decide a balanced and practical position on the acceptance of Rapid Antigen testing for vaccinated cruise passengers as numerous neighbours in the region have.
- Increase the capacity of our health care system and generally appropriately resource the country to sustain increased mitigated health risks in this COVID-19 climate.
- Provide soft loan facilities for affected registered small to medium (SMEs) businesses with a minimal interest rate and a reasonable repayment moratorium.
- A stronger stance on vaccination requirements within the public sector to achieve herd immunity and protect our country.

The Government and people of St Kitts & Nevis have invested far too much in the Cruise Sector's development to allow it to perish amidst the reopening of this sector in neighbouring territories who we are allowing to become our main competitors and eroding all of our gains in this sector over the last 20 years.

Capital Investments ranging from the addition of a second cruise pier, development of Port Zante to the individual investments of taxi and tour operators, craft vendors, restaurant owners, duty-free operators must be protected to the extent possible. Furthermore, a failure to restart our cruise industry for the upcoming high season will result in the further permanent closure of tourism-driven businesses. This will leave our visitor experience with significant gaps and severely damage our overall tourism product and guest experience. The Chamber values protecting the health and wellbeing of the citizens of the country but remains steadfast in its position that we must learn to operate our economy in a Covid-19 environment.

The St Kitts Nevis Chamber of Industry and Commerce urges Cabinet to decide in favour of reopening the cruise sector through reasonable, responsible, and practical negotiations and decide a balanced and practical position on the acceptance of Rapid Antigen testing for vaccinated cruise passengers considering the imminent decisions being made by the cruise lines regarding their Caribbean itineraries for the balance of the calendar year and in some instances the entire upcoming high season.