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Hotel Association Going Green with Blue Flag



The V.I. Hotel and Tourism Association is going green with its participation in the internationally recognized Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE)'s Blue Flag Program. Five of the territory's beaches have been nominated by the Hotel Association for inclusion.

"It's a win-win for tourism and the environment," Hotel Association President Lisa Hamilton told about 40 people Friday at the organization's meeting at the Westin Resort and Villas on St. John.

The St. Thomas beaches are Lindbergh Bay in front of the Emerald Beach Hotel, Magens Bay and Great Bay by the Ritz-Carlton St. Thomas Hotel. On St. Croix, the beach at the Palms at Pelican Cove is on the list. Trunk Bay on St. John rounds out those nominated for Blue Flag certification.

FEE is a non-government, non-profit organization promoting sustainable development through environmental education. It gets its message out mainly through five programs: Blue Flag, Eco-Schools, Young Reporters for the Environment, Learning about Forests and Green Key. Blue Flag encourages sustainable development of beaches and marinas through strict criteria on water quality, environmental education and information, environmental management, and safety and other services.

The designation is seasonal, allowing the Hotel Association to adopt the program from Dec. 1 to June 30. This eliminates hurricane season, a time when water quality can be impacted by run off.

A panel representing many of the territory's environmental organizations and government agencies with environmental responsibility as well as other organizations will evaluate the beaches. The Hotel Association will know Dec. 1 if those five beaches can start flying the Blue Flag.

The hotels located at the beaches and the agencies responsible for those where no hotels sit paid \$1,000 to be considered, Hamilton said. The Hotel Association is picking up the tab for 20 weeks of water quality monitoring, with the hotels and agencies responsible after that. Hamilton said that Hovensa contributed \$10,000 and the V.I. Tourism Department \$6,000 toward implementing the Blue Flag Program.

As required by the Blue Flag Program, the Hotel Association named a non-governmental organization, the V.I. Conservation Society, to oversee the program.

Conservation Society President Jason Budsan said that ecotourism is one of the best ways for visitors to enjoy their stay.

“Three cheers for going green,” he said.

Puerto Rico earned the first Blue Flag designation in 2010 in the Caribbean for Pelicano Beach on the Coffin Island nature reserve. Five other areas in the Caribbean are already participating in the Blue Flag Program, Hamilton said.

After the Hotel Association gets those five beaches flying the Blue Flags, Hamilton said it plans to bring marinas into the Blue Flag program. After that, a similar program called Green Key will target hotels.

Miquel Quinones of the V.I. Energy Office told the Hotel Association members that if they start gearing up for the Green Key program now, they will save money on energy and water costs.

In other Hotel Association matters discussed at the meeting, Chairman Trudie Prior said the organization is developing a position paper for members to use when they meet with senators.

“It’s important we take a big forward step in advocacy when we visit senators,” she said.

Areas included in the position paper cover transportation, high prices, limited choice, traffic congestion, and use of the territory’s Tourism Revolving Fund for other than marketing the territory.

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