

ARGYLE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT IN 2025: LET'S CELEBRATE!

BY

UNITY LABOUR PARTY

THE BLESSING OF AIA

The building of the Argyle International Airport (AIA), firstly, has the significance, symbolically, to the people of SVG, at home and abroad, similar to that of the quest of the ancient Hebrew people, against all odds and in the face of determined opposition by enemies internally, to construct the Temple to house the Ark of the Covenant as told in The Chronicles, and akin also to the rebuilding of the city walls around Holy Jerusalem which had been broken for 112 years, as recounted in the Book of Nehemiah. The 8th anniversary of the AIA's opening is on February 14, 2025. Let's celebrate this extraordinary achievement.

Indeed, we in SVG built the AIA splendidly well under one political leadership, that of Comrade Ralph and the Unity Labour Party (ULP), from conception, to completion, to operation. David, the man after God's own heart, oversaw the detailed plans and gathered most of the abundant resources to build the Temple, but it was left to his son Solomon to execute David's vision. When the ULP came to office in March 2001, we inherited nothing to construct AIA — no plans, no resources, no materials, not even a ten-penny nail. But as with David and Solomon in the case of the Temple, and with the Prophet-Builder Nehemiah in the case of Jerusalem's broken city walls, our leadership and the bulk of our people were blessed by God to do His work, and He imbued us with faith, hope, and love. In the same way that God brought help to David, Solomon, and Nehemiah from some persons who were not believers in the God of Abraham, He moved in His mysterious ways to cause help to be rendered to us in SVG by some nations and some leaders who were not adherents of the teachings of our Christ. He brought so many gifts to us from near and far. Amazing!

Secondly, the blessing of AIA has been a central plank in the transformation of our economy, a fulcrum around which the altered economic paradigm revolves, and a creator of jobs and inclusive prosperity for our people.

So, AIA is hugely symbolic and massively of practical benefit to all of SVG!

NDP'S OPPOSITION

The backward New Democratic Party (NDP) relentlessly opposed our construction of the AIA. The NDP mocked us in our efforts, spewed anger and bile at our endeavours, and conspired politically against its construction. All their doomsday predictions of the AIA have come to nought. Even, today, they

wish it ill in so many insidious ways; indeed, the NDP and its fellow travellers are still active in seeking to undermine the efficacy of the AIA's operations. Their perfidy will not cease so long as the Comrade and the ULP are in office; they in the NDP shamelessly proclaim their anxiety for a TASTE of office — they have actually stated that they want a “TASTE of the thing”; they are not interested in the people's welfare; they hunger and thirst for power. Yet again, for a sixth successive time the NDP will fail at the polls. And the AIA is prospering, more than ever.

AIA'S OPERATIONS 2017 – 2024

As Comrade Ralph had informed Parliament, the government had decided to capitalise the operations of the AIA for the first four, or even five years. In other words, we anticipated that in those first years the AIA would likely show an operational loss; we thus planned for that with an annual subvention allocated to AIA's recurrent operations. No one, however, could have reasonably anticipated a triple whammy in quick succession: the collapse of LIAT, and the COVID pandemic in 2020, and the volcanic eruptions and Hurricane Elsa in 2021; and their knock-on effects lingered.

The AIA opened on February 14, 2017, six weeks into that year. In that very year (2017), the passenger movement numbered 227,564; (these numbers include those from E.T. Joshua at Arnos Vale for the first 6 weeks); by the end of 2019, the number had increased to 251,105; in the dread years of 2020 and 2021, the respective numbers fell drastically to 81,467 and 55,003; indeed, the months like April 2020 and February 2021 saw near-total shutdowns with passenger counts below 2000. A recovery began in 2022 with 142,927 passengers; in 2023, the number rose further to 223,828. And in 2024, a record number of 282,261 passengers were chalked up. Over one million passengers have passed through AIA since February 2017 despite COVID, the volcanic eruptions, and Hurricanes Elsa and Beryl.

2024 PASSENGER MOVEMENT

The near-300,000 passenger through-put at AIA was impressive. December 2024 was particularly vibrant with total passenger movements rising to 33,511 over the record hitherto of 24,078 passengers in December 2023.

In 2023, there were 10 airlines operating in and out of AIA, plus private aircraft; in 2024, there were 13 airlines plus additional private aircraft.

Additionally, the growth in flight operations has been significant. In 2024, the AIA recorded a total of 6,033 flights, including 756 flights in December alone. This compares favourably to the numbers of the previous year: 5,160 flights for the year 2023, and 620 in December 2023. This upward trend in flight operations reflects the increasing demand for air travel and our airport's

expanding role as a vital transportation hub. We anticipate continued advancements in the coming years.

AIRLINE PARTNERSHIPS

In 2023, the following airlines operated regularly from AIA: Caribbean Airlines, Air Canada, American Airlines, Virgin Atlantic, Inter Caribbean, Air Adelphi, SVG Air, and Mustique Airways. In 2024, additional airline partnerships out of AIA were formed: LIAT 2020 (commenced on October 4, 2024); Jet Blue Airways (non-stop flights between New York's JFK and AIA started on October 9, 2024); Sunrise Airways (commenced on October 28, 2024); and WINAIR (initiated operations at AIA on November 16, 2024).

And on Saturday December 7, 2024, the AIA welcomed the arrival of three American Airlines flights from three major cities in the USA (Miami, Charlotte-North Carolina, and New York JFK).

FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2024

Preliminary numbers for the financial year ending on December 31, 2024, indicate that the AIA had an operating gain of \$2 million before subvention. Total revenues increased from \$18.26 million in 2023 to \$28.04 million in 2024, in part reflective of the restoration of the pre-COVID service charge of US\$40 (in June 2023) and the subsequent increase to US\$55 in June 2024.

Revenues from ground handling services increased by 20 percent over 2023 with revenues in this regard rising from \$7.8 million in 2023 to \$9.4 million in 2024.

Some expenses showed notable increases: Salaries increased by 6.7 percent to \$10.6 million in 2024 as over 100 additional staff members were hired to help sustain operations as flights increased. Repairs and maintenance expenses also showed increases; overall, expenses in 2024 went up by 5.5 percent over 2023. The staff at AIA currently numbers close to 450. It is to be noted that even in the very rough days of 2020, 2021, and 2022, AIA never laid off any staff member. Some people took that for granted.

The audited financial statements for 2021 and 2022 have been completed by the auditors. Work is being done on the accounts for 2023 by the auditors.

SOME OTHER SIGNIFICANT HIGHLIGHTS IN 2024

There were some other significant highlights in 2024, presented below summarily:

- ✚ On May 24, 2024: AIA conducted its first comprehensive emergency simulation exercise.

- ✚ In 2024, AIA warmly received the first female and first male Vincentian American airline pilots.
- ✚ AIA was the locale for the CELAC-CARICOM initiative on the Guyana-Venezuela border issue. The outcome was the much-heralded Argyle Declaration signed by the Presidents of Guyana and Venezuela, brokered under the leadership of Comrade Ralph. Peace and Love!
- ✚ The Sandals “Meet and Greet Lounge” established.
- ✚ Movements of leaders for the CELAC Summit on March 1, 2024, at Sandals Resort.
- ✚ Handling of all incoming passengers (including cricketers) for the 2024 ICC Men’s T20 Games and the Bangladesh-West Indies series.
- ✚ In April/May 2024, AIA and the Public Service Union concluded relevant negotiations and averted possible industrial action.

STRATEGIC PLANS FOR 2025

Among the strategic initiatives at AIA for 2025 are the following vital areas:

1. Enhanced Customer Service Offerings: Launch of a well-equipped executive lounge; introduction of two additional restaurants and a new duty-free shop.
2. Deployment of Advanced Technologies: This is aimed at capturing real-time passenger feedback via digital kiosks and mobile applications.
3. Enhanced Maintenance Programme in all areas.
4. Airport Masterplan Study: This is to guide further airport development.
5. Compliance and Standard: Strengthening aviation safety, security, and operational standards, for operational excellence.
6. Human Resource Development: Further training; enhanced professionalism; implementation to group medical and life insurance plan.

INVESTMENTS, JOB, AND INCLUSIVE PROSPERITY

AIA has brought in its wake huge investments, increased employment, and inclusive prosperity for all concerned.

Already, AIA has brought huge hotel investments way in excess of EC \$1 billion: Sandals Resort; Holiday Inn; Myah’s Suite; expansion and upgrade of numerous hotels including Hotel Alexandrina, La Vue, Beachcombers; construction of several guest houses and apartments; hotel facilities are being constructed,

though slowly, at Peter's Hope and Ratho Mill, huge increase in "Airbnb" facilities for visitors.

Further investments have occurred in ancillary plants, equipment, and services: Restaurants, night clubs, tour buses and taxis, water sports, land sports, entertainment, etc.

Massive creation of new permanent jobs: Nearly 900 at Sandals Resort alone. Opportunities are enhanced for farmers, fishers, crafts people, entertainers, and others in the range of ancillary tourism and leisure facilities.

More investments are at hand: Sandals are about to start-up construction of 18 additional high-quality villas at an estimated cost of nearly US \$20 million. The Marriott Hotel (projected investment of over US \$120 million) is scheduled to start by mid-year 2025. There are others in the pipe-line. Stay tuned!

SUMMATION

The vision of the ULP is bearing fruit handsomely for the people of SVG. It is all around for everyone to see. The AIA is a central part of this vision becoming a lived reality. Other parts include the facilities in education, health, housing, sports, culture, physical infrastructure (Canouan airport, bridges, roads, sea, and river defences), advanced applied technologies including information technologies, and other public polices in areas such as social protection, good governance, public order and safety, regionalism, and international solidarity (foreign policy). And so, it's six in a row. Labour is working in the people's interest.

Article for week of February 14, 2025