

Frenchman's Reef could resume construction soon

By PATRICIA BORNES
Daily News Staff

DiamondRock Hospitality told VI. Economic Development Authority board members Tuesday that it expects a new owner to take over its stalled renovation of the former Marriott's Frenchman's Reef and Morning Star Beach Resort on St. Thomas, but it is still requesting continued waivers to employment and charitable contribution requirements so it can keep lucrative tax breaks through 2022 anyway.

Speaking for DiamondRock Frenchman's Owner, Inc., DiamondRock Chief Financial Officer William Tennis requested the board waive the employment requirement of 415 full-time employees from Jan. 1, 2021, to Dec. 31, 2022, and reduce the required charitable contributions from \$90,000 to \$35,000 for the same period.

Renovations to Frenchman's Reef were in full swing in 2019 with a late 2020 reopening date when the pandemic struck, Tennis told the board.

"No one thought we could have been facing a pandemic," he said. "In response, in March 2020, we placed all activity on hold. As travel halted, the hospitality industry experienced a downturn, and DiamondRock was severely impacted and capital-constrained. As you are aware, we are in



The long-stalled renovation of Marriott's Frenchman's Reef Beach Resort on St. Thomas could resume in July if a deal in the works closes at the end of April, according to senior DiamondRock management.

the process of securing a joint venture with a capital partner."

The new partner would be the primary owner going forward, tak-

ing over the project and completing construction.

DiamondRock would remain as a joint venture partner, Tennis said.

"I will be honest, we would have a relatively small minority position," Tennis said.

"I'm reasonably optimistic we

will reach agreement and close by the end of the month. If we close, the rebuild would restart in July, is the expectation."

The hotel is not expected to reopen until September 2022. DiamondRock has requested the extension to give the new owner time to ramp up to the full 415 employee quota.

A hardened block of rooms that was to serve as a much-needed hurricane shelter on the property ultimately did not receive approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, according to Tennis.

"The dates have changed several times," EDA board member Haldane Davies told Tennis. "We have tried to work along with you to the extent possible but we need some firm dates. How firm are you on the commitment of DiamondRock and your new partner to complete construction within the September 2022 time frame?"

"I'm reluctant to commit if that's what you are looking for," Tennis responded, "but there is no reason they would not want to move forward as quickly as possible. Once they have acquired the investment there will be an impetus for both parties to get the hotel going and start earning income as soon as possible."

The project won't restart within the year if DiamondRock is unable to go forward with the transaction, he added.

UVI agriculture school develops two new sorrel varieties for year-round growth

By LORI ABBOTTS
Daily News Staff

Tart and sour, sorrel is a familiar cultural drink in the Virgin Islands, and elsewhere in the Caribbean, particularly around the holidays. However, sorrel is a winter crop not readily available during the warmer months. That, however, is about to change. Thomas Zimmerman of the University of the Virgin Islands School of Agriculture's Agricultural Experiment Station unveiled two new sorrel varieties last week that will double the plant's growing season to 10 months out of the year.

The Biotechnology and Agroforestry program, led by Zimmerman, introduced its Festival and Midnite sorrel varieties, the result of 11 years of sorrel plant breeding and selection. With the combination of Caribbean and African varieties, Zimmerman was able to develop better and more productive sorrel varieties.

"Both Festival and Midnite have deep crimson fruiting calyces and



Photo by UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Dr. Thomas Zimmerman of the UVI School of Agriculture's Agricultural Experiment Station introduced two new varieties of sorrel plants that will increase production and growing season for the fruit.

have a higher tolerance to calcareous soils than Day Neutral," said Zimmerman. Although the taste

remains unchanged, "Festival has a longer fruit and Midnite has a unique leaf shape and open

leaf canopy to easily see fruiting calyces."

Zimmerman had seeds from

more than 100 different types of sorrel, but lost most of them during hurricanes Irma and Maria. These were two of the crosses that he was able to bring back to life.

The seeds of two sorrel varieties from Nigeria and Ghana were obtained from the USDA Plant Genetic Resources Unit in Griffin, Ga. Each of the two African sorrels were crossed with one from Trinidad. Plants from these crosses were selected for their dark fruit and high production. Selections from the third generation were then crossed with a variety from St. Kitts.

To start, Zimmerman grew several varieties to determine which would tolerate St. Croix's calcareous soil, which contains an abundance of calcium carbonate, making it easier to grow anywhere on the island.

"The plants are very sensitive, but we were able to find some plants that did tolerate it and started working with that, because that would also expand where farmers

See **SORREL**, page 4