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PR2012/003

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NewsRelease Feature

Regina LaBega: One year at the helm of affairs at PJIAE

SIMPSON BAY, St. Maarten (June 28, 2012)—July 1, Emancipation Day, has a double significance for Regina LaBega, managing director of the Princess Juliana International Airport operating company (PJIAE). Not only would it be this year that the day would be observed for the first time as a public holiday in St. Maarten, it would also be the first anniversary of the appointment of LaBega as the first female to head a major government-owned company in St. Maarten. In this interview with Offshore Editing Services (OES), the former director of the St. Maarten Tourist Bureau (STB) reflects on her first year at the helm of affairs at PJIAE.

OES: How was the transition from STB to PJIAE?

RL: Excellent. The reception of the staff was incredible. As a former member of the Supervisory Board of Directors for some seven years prior to my appointment, I knew the workings of the airport and knew many of the staff. Also, I count myself fortunate to share the same vision for the airport as the Supervisory Board of Directors, several of the members of which I had worked very closely with during my tenure on the board.

The transition to PJIAE could also be seen as a natural progression in my career because there is synergy between tourism and the airport. But I must stress that I was overwhelmed by how the employees at all levels welcomed and supported me. They made the transition seamless and made it possible for me to literally hit the ground running. I am eternally grateful to them for that.

OES: What goals did you set yourself for the first year and have these been accomplished?

RL: Well, when I came in, the first thing I did was to have a quick scan of the operations of the airport done. This was to give me a clear view of where I was actually starting from. One of the results of that quick scan was the need for the rehabilitation of the runway. Also, the need to relocate the fuel farm and increase the storage capacity for aviation fuel were highlighted. The rehab of the runway is scheduled to start in October of this year. We are currently still in the planning stage for the relocation of the fuel farm.

Another important point was to enhance the FBO business, that is, the need to focus on the General Aviation sector. We have just received the first draft of a Master Plan for the airport, which looks at the physical design as well as a traffic forecast that includes General Aviation and cargo. The development of the FBO business is part of the Master Plan. We're still 'number two' in General Aviation in the region and one of our major objectives is to maintain this position and even grow it. This has synergy with tourism as it attracts upscale visitors that would also impact the yachting industry and other sectors of the economy.

In addition, the quick scan indicated the need to improve the hub function of PJIA, especially for the islands for which we serve as a hub, such as Anguilla, St. Barths, Saba and Statia as well as St. Martin (North), of course. You will recall that just recently I met with the newly-elected President of the Collectivité of St. Martin, Mr. Alain Richardson at the Hotel de la Collectivité

precisely to discuss this issue. We agreed to cooperate in a number of areas, including the sharing of statistical data, and the setting up of a joint information booth at PJIA between the tourist offices of both halves of the island. Similarly, we agreed to cooperate in the area of General Aviation aircraft so that if there is no space at PJIA to accommodate these aircraft, they would be sent to the Grand Case airport rather than to other airports in neighboring islands. These are some of the concrete steps we are taking to solidify our position as a hub airport.

OES: What would you say are the highlights of your first year in office?

RL: The highlights of my first year in office? These include:

- Increasing the visibility of PJIAE as a good corporate citizen. For example, we not too long ago adopted the Prince Willem Alexander School. We have also been quite involved in environmental protection issues as well as the Red Campaign.
- Making WiFi available to users of the airport.
- Increasing passenger movement at the airport in the first quarter of 2012 compared to the same period in 2011.
- Enhancing visitor experience through cultural activities like dressing up the airport for Carnival, complete with live revelers welcoming visitors and participating in a similar vein in Valentine's Day.
- Finally, I would mention improving relations with the workers with the signing of a new Collective Labor Agreement, the CLA, and partnership with the unions.

OES: Are you satisfied with the CLA you signed with the unions? What role do the employees play in the development of PJIAE?

RL: Yes, I am. The negotiations had begun even before I came on board. I must applaud the negotiating team led by Mrs. Shirley Pantophlet. They did a very good job. I must also thank the shop stewards, and the WICSU; they really care about the employees and PJIAE and this is reflected in the results of the negotiations. I am looking forward to improving on this CLA in the next three years.

The role of the employees in the development of PJIAE? It's because of the employees that we have PJIAE. PJIAE is the employees. We have a highly professional cadre who often go beyond the call of duty to ensure that PJIAE continues to develop as one of the leaders in aviation in the region. I am very proud of them.

OES: What is your ultimate vision for PJIAE and how do you intend to accomplish it?

RL: I want to ensure that PJIA remains the leading international hub airport in the region. I intend to accomplish that by keeping up with the technological trends, being customer friendly by offering what all consumers expect from an international airport. I want to make sure that the hub islands realize that we are their airport too and do not need to invest in another airport. We are working on immigration and customs pre-clearance for passengers, a concept that has been embraced by the airlines, and which would enhance the passenger experience, especially for our hub destinations.

Seeing that the airlines are at the core business of the airport, I also intend to aggressively work on attracting new airlines, adding new routes, thus turning the island into a year-round destination. We will focus on the South American market, a rapidly growing market. We will also continue to speak to the airlines to increase their routes and frequency of flights, especially seeing that the cost of fuel has decreased.

OES: How do you see PJIAE within the context of the economic development of St. Maarten?

RL: Without PJIAE, one can safely say there is no tourism and tourism is our economic mainstay. Over 1,300 people make up the airport community, making the economic impact of PJIAE, from the point of view of employment, really significant. Not only do we provide transportation, we have a major impact on the economic sustainability not only of St. Maarten but of St. Martin, Anguilla and other islands as well. Passenger movement at PJIA in 2010 stood at over 1.6 million people. The average over the last three years is in this ballpark. In future, PJIA sees itself expanding into an airport city that would offer several other services, including a possible airport hotel. The airport is the major gateway to the island, as well as to other neighboring destinations. It therefore has a pivotal role in the development of our economies.

OES: What challenges do you think could obstruct the achievement of your goals?

RL: That is an interesting question. The aviation industry is very susceptible to the effects of natural disasters such as hurricanes, volcanic ash, etc. It is also easily affected by financial crises (oil prices) and other man-made disasters like 9-11 terrorist attacks on the US. All of these pose serious challenges as our recent history has shown. But then again, St. Maarten has always shown remarkable resilience in dealing with such challenges.

Photo caption1:

Regina LaBega, Managing Director, Princess Juliana Int'l Airport.