

RELEASE IMMEDIATELY, PLEASE

A wicked threat to Exuma's golden goose

400 BAHAMIAN JOBS COULD BE AT STAKE

Statement by

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EXUMA

I have been saddened by advice I recently received that on the website of a senior Opposition politician, Fred Mitchell, the Member of Parliament for Fox Hill, there were threats of a proposed demonstration in Exuma over the operation of the Sandals resort at Emerald Bay.

My understanding is that such a demonstration is being contemplated by Mr. Mitchell and another politician, Anthony Moss, the Member of Parliament for Exuma, and in that connection I feel compelled to respond to what I term as complete nonsense, so that the misinformation and lies might be exposed.

I do so in light of the fact that for the past year I have been closely associated with the operations at Sandals at Emerald Bay in Exuma as one of its consultants, and secondly as a concerned Exumian who is tired of persons, especially non-Exumians, trying to stop the growth and progress of the island.

It is very sad that a senior politician and former cabinet minister and another politician with interests in Exuma would now engage and associate themselves with this kind of gutter politics without taking the time to sit with the owners or management of the resort.

I find this kind of behaviour most disrespectful, but it is often said “when a man is drowning he will hold on to a straw.”

It appears that these politicians in their quest to hold on to power are prepared to go to the limit if they had to and destroy the good people of Exuma even if it means treating the largest single private employer on the island with disdain and disrespect.

That employer, Sandals resort, is enabling many Exumians to put food on their tables, clothes on their children, afford mortgages on their taxis, and rents on their accommodations, and yet there are indications that Butch Stewart and Sandals are not appreciated.

The fact of the matter is that Sandals at Emerald Bay is pretty much what today is keeping the economy of Exuma alive.

2

There are important facts with which Exumians and other Bahamians should be acquainted in connection with the Sandals resort in Exuma. The hotel opened in 2010 with one hundred and eighty-three (183) rooms, employing over four hundred persons, the majority of them from Exuma and other family islands, especially Grand Bahama and Eleuthera.

One needs only to do the maths – one hundred and eighty-three (183) rooms and over four hundred persons employed.

When Sandals came on the scene, most of the foreign airlines had terminated their services. Even at the height of the Four Seasons' stay, flights to the island were limited to once-weekly services by Continental Connections, American Eagle, U.S. Air, and Delta, and services by the domestic carriers Bahamasair, Sky Bahamas, and Western Airlines.

Today, just over 12 months of operation in Exuma, Sandals has been able to attract such carriers as Air Canada twice weekly, Delta twice weekly, along with American Eagle which has now introduced jet services, Continental Connection, along with Bahamasair, Sky Bahamas and Western Airlines, all through the enterprising negotiations of Sandals and Mr. Butch Stewart.

Television viewers all over the United States, Canada, The Caribbean, and other parts of the world now see this lovely island of ours through the impressive and effective medium of CNN, MSNBC, ABC and CBS. All paid for by Sandals and the Hon. Gordon "Butch" Stewart.

Additionally, the company flies to the island hundreds of travel agents to observe and enjoy the product firsthand. They return to their destinations and enthusiastically sell Sandals.

The following chart shows the numbers of travel agents who were brought to Exuma during the period September 7th – December 1, 2010, providing exposure to the resort, and to the whole Bahamas.

3

GATEWAYDATEBOOKING #AIRCRAFTNUMBER OF AGENTS

BALTIMORESEPT. 7 – 96294981BOEING 757196

NEWARKSEPT. 10 – 126294983BOEING 757196

CHARLOTTESEPT. 12 – 146294989BOEING 757196

ORLANDO SEPT. 19 – 216294994 BOEING 757196
TORONTO SEPT. 26 - 286295000 EMBRAER E9092
ATLANTA OCT. 3 – 56294976 BOEING 757196
CLEVELAND OCT. 10 – 126295005 BOEING 757196
MEMPHIS OCT 17 – 196295002 BOEING 757196
DALLAS OCT. 24 – 266295009 BOEING 737-800162
CHICAGO NOV. 7 – 96295012 BOEING 737-800162
MINNEAPOLIS NOV. 14 – 166296229 BOEING 737-800162
TORONTO NOV. 18 – 206294997 EMBRAER E9092
NEW YORK/JFK NOV. 29 – DEC 16296832 BOEING 757196

4

In the meantime on the ground, the hotel has honoured the same agreements with Exuma Transit as was with Four Seasons for the transportation of its guests.

With regard to the charge of poor treatment of Sandals employees by the hotel this is sheer rubbish.

The Sandals chain of hotels all over the Caribbean, including Emerald Bay, has received numerous prestigious awards for its operation. Are they being awarded for treating Bahamians poorly? Many persons complain about the presence of Jamaicans on the property. I suppose that everyone of colour who does not speak like a Bahamian is a Jamaican.

What they fail to accept is that these persons are here with permission of the Department of Immigration. I have observed many of the expatriate workers at the hotel at work. I see them as professionals, I see them as a hard working people, and I feel that any Bahamian who may have an issue with them being here could do well by adopting their work ethic and attitude.

What must also be understood is that Bahamians can also be found working on several of the Sandals hotels in the chain, including Turks & Caicos, St. Lucia, Antigua and Jamaica. This is common with hotels that are part of a chain.

What about the many foreign white employees who worked at the then Four Seasons Hotel who treated the Bahamian workers like dirt under the watch of these politicians who now complain. I don't recall any complaint coming from them then.

The hotel in recent times has been managed by some of Sandals best: Jeremy Mutton, Patrick Drakes and Kyle Mayse.

Since taking over as manager of the hotel, many programmes have been introduced to enhance staff morale – staff luncheons, breakfasts, bingos, sporting activities just to name a few.

A barber shop now operates on the resort just for staff who can make use of the services at a reasonable cost.

As far as underpayment of staff is concerned, no one is paid below the government's minimum wage. Every staff member in addition to his wage receives a very attractive gratuity which is more attractive than most hotels, owing to Sandals' high occupancy.

These same people who are complaining might want to check the salaries being paid to some of the local workers who were hired by them when they were in power and make the comparison.

5

The staff at the hotel should be made to understand that the property could only pay what it can afford, higher wage may mean less staff – who knows. I feel that as long as human beings are involved in any situation, there will be a community problem, even in the churches.

I am satisfied that the resort is doing much more than many in trying to better its community relations problem.

For the first time in the history of Exuma we hear about a hotel choir. This choir now makes appearances at many local church and civic events and is a big hit wherever it appears.

The Sandals Foundation has taken on many community projects, including the adoption of the L. N. Coakley High School where it has with the assistance of the P.T.A. provided materials for repairs to the buildings, school supplies, stoves and refrigerators. It has also committed itself in conjunction with the Exuma foundation to construct a lunch pavilion on the school grounds for the students.

Roker's Point Primary School, which is nearest to the resort has also been adopted and has been the beneficiary of many Sandals assistance programmes.

The Foundation also partnered with the Exuma Foundation in carrying out earlier this year a spay and neuter programme on stray cats and dogs on the island. Last year, the Foundation sponsored the first Lion Fish Derby, where over three hundred (300) Lion Fish were caught and up to two thousand dollars (\$2,000.00) awarded in prize money.

The hotel has also been a major sponsor of the National Family Island Regatta and many of the other small regattas and homecomings on the island. Regular social events are held at the hotel where central and local government practitioners along with employees, members of the religious and business communities are invited to be a part.

Just recently, the hotel accepted fifteen (15) young persons who were school leavers and is presently giving them an eight-week training course where at the end of it, the successful students will be awarded certificates enabling them to enter into the hospitality industry with qualifications, including any of the Sandals or Beaches resorts.

Since the acquisition of the hotel, millions of dollars have been spent on renovations, conversions of rooms and other facilities. Recently, over sixty local employees in the construction industry were engaged in the conversion of sixty-six rooms recently acquired by the hotel into regular hotel rooms now moving Sandals at Emerald Bay from one hundred and eighty-three (183) rooms to two Hundred and forty-five (245). Three more restaurants are being added to the property. More staff to be employed.

5

. Certainly, in this climate of high unemployment in Exuma, anyone who is responsible for the employment of over four hundred permanent staff and almost one hundred temporary construction workers should be treated with the highest respect and dignity by everyone, from the government down.

Exumians should have a good look at themselves, and not forget that faithful Wednesday when many of them went to work and learnt of the closure of the Four Seasons Hotel.

They should be aware of reckless politicians and outsiders who are trying to sink the ship of prosperity. These same people, when they sink it, will then leave as they always do, and go elsewhere to sink other ships.

I can testify that the welcome mat was and is still laid out to politicians from all political divides, including the Member of Parliament for Exuma. Mr. Butch Stewart is that kind of individual.

Whilst many have embraced the gesture, the Member of Parliament for Exuma has not had the respect to embrace any invitation or show up to enquire as to how the operation is faring. The same operation that is keeping his supporters from having to leave home and seek a livelihood elsewhere. What gratitude! What respect!

I say to him, "Other investors are watching." I say to Exumians, "You should be watching" and I say to the Bahamas, "You take note."

Is Sandals good for Exuma? You be the judge.

ends

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