

SAVUSAVU TAKEOFF?

Innovative public-private airport plan boosted by delegation visit

By PETER LOMAS

Savusavu has seized the initiative on fixing airport and air service difficulties limiting tourism and business growth in the North.

Detailed proposals were presented during the weekend to a high-level delegation led by Attorney-General and Tourism Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum. They could relatively quickly see:

- A 200-metre extension and upgrading to Savusavu's existing runway to enable bigger planes like Pacific Sun's 44-seater ATR 42-500s to operate there.

- The project being implemented through a groundbreaking public-private partnership between the Government and Savusavu Tourism Association. This would see Savusavu Tourism Association playing a significant role in the financing and management of the airport in partnership with the Government and its Airports Fiji Limited.

- Local equipment and resources being used for the work to substantially cut costs, with only expert consultants brought from outside.

Mr Sayed-Khaiyum facilitated face-to-face talks between the association and aviation industry leaders to jump start the discussion.

As a result Air Pacific/Pacific Sun and Airports Fiji Limited engineers are expected in Savusavu within about a week. They will start looking at technical issues, and ways the project could work.

Mr Sayed-Khaiyum led his delegation on a Saturday-Sunday trip to Taveuni, Labasa and Savusavu aboard Air Wakaya's Cessna Grand Caravan.

His objective was meetings with tourism and business leaders in each place to directly discuss long-standing airport and air capacity problems, and possible solutions.

"We're here because we know there are problems," Mr Sayed-Khaiyum said early in the trip. But he assured that under the government of Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama: "There is a mood of change here."

Those Mr Sayed-Khaiyum had aboard the special flight included key people in making any changes:

- Air Pacific managing director/chief executive David Pflieger.

- Airports Fiji Limited chairman Rick Rickman.

- Jimmy Samson, general manager of Air Pacific's domestic subsidiary Pacific Sun,

- and Public Enterprises, Tourism and Communication permanent secretary Elizabeth Powell.

In SAVUSAVU, Mr Sayed-Khaiyum and his delegation were presented detailed proposals for the airport extension - and why it is essential.

They had a busy programme of discussions and site visits. These began from the time they were greeted at the airport by industry leaders Justin Hunter (J. Hunter Pearls), Greg Taylor (Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort) and Tim Eden (Savusavu Hot Springs Hotel).

The Savusavu Tourism Association presentation



In Savusavu yesterday (from left): Greg Taylor (Savusavu Tourism Association), Justin Hunter (Savusavu Tourism Association), Elizabeth Powell (Government), Attorney-General and Tourism Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, David Pflieger (Air Pacific), Rick Rickman (Airports Fiji) and Jimmy Samson (Pacific Sun). Photo: KAILASH RAO

highlighted the potential for tourism growth and said: "This region is one of the fastest growing in the country and many developments are constrained through lack of air capacity in and out of Savusavu."

At the moment Pacific Sun is only able to operate its 16-seater Twin Otters and small Britten-Norman Islanders into Savusavu. Both the number of passengers and baggage which can be carried are restricted. There are also technology, such as weather radar, and comfort shortages aboard these aircraft.

The proposal added: "One opportunity that Air Pacific has is the ability to offer seamless travel from international destinations right into wonderful destinations such as Savusavu."

"Equipment and capital constraints are prohibiting them from utilising this opportunity. Making Savusavu compliant for operations with their larger and more efficient domestic aircraft will demonstrate immediate benefits."

The proposal outlined developments that could go ahead if the air service problems can be fixed.

These include expansion of Savusavu's internationally-acclaimed Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Island Resort and Namale Resort and Spa.

Other projects in the pipeline, the tourism association said, include Nawi Island, Savusavu Village Marina, Savasi Island, Wavi Island, Nukudrau, Salt Lake Development and various smaller projects.

If the airport is developed it would provide a revitalised gateway to the North, the association said. This would allow hundreds of millions of dollars of projects to move ahead, it said.

In TAVEUNI: Taveuni Tourism Association mem-

bers gathered at Ric and Do Cammick's Taveuni Island Resort to detail how air service problems cripple tourism growth on Taveuni and nearby islands.

Possible solutions included: Short-term, Pacific Sun's Twin Otters refuelling at Taveuni so they can carry more passengers and baggage up from Nadi. Possibly using a 37-seat Dash 8-100 aircraft into Matei. Longer term, Airports Fiji Limited has already had a team in Taveuni looking at alternative sites to Matei airport so bigger planes can operate to the island.

In LABASA: Labasa Chamber of Commerce and Fiji Islands Trade and Investment Bureau representatives gathered at the Taki Hotel. They told Mr Sayed-Khaiyum's delegation of frustrations with Pacific Sun passenger and cargo services.

Possible solutions included: installing runway lights and associated navigation aids at Labasa. This would enable better Pacific Sun ATR 42 utilisation with flights able to operate into Labasa at night and in poor weather.

Savusavu Tourism Association's presentation highlighted one theme common in all three discussion venues

It said: "We believe the benefits of increased access will flow to all sectors of the community, far beyond just tourism operators."

Mr Sayed-Khaiyum is pushing for quicker action as part of the Government's "Look North" development policies. This includes spreading the tourism dollar further.

The busy weekend of high-powered work in the North was part of this. Watch for developments to follow.

JULY Specials

Slazenger Jnr Raquets
\$49

Puma Hammer Joggers
\$129 to \$99

Grays Hockey Shoes

Grippe Bowling Grips
\$7.95

Plitted Net Ball Skirt
\$25

Steeden Head Guard
\$59 to \$39.95

Ball Specials // \$24.95

Gilbert Net Ball

Classic Trainer Rugby Ball

Touch Ball

Steeden Bull Shoulder Guard
\$89 to \$69

Hire Purchase NOW available on easy credit terms on YORK Fitness equipments.

- Bikes
- Treadmills
- Benches
- Weights

And many more...

Only Available at:

Suva, MHCC, Nadi

3315910 3310007 6705910