

St. Eustatius, November 20, 2021.

Dear Chairman and members of the Kingdom Relations Committee,

Yesterday there was a somewhat heated meeting of the Island Council about the ferry (St. Kitts, St. Eustatius, Saba, St. Maarten and v.v.) and the alternative air connections. The overall setting is clear:

- The Island Council is committed to affordable air connections between the BES islands (an adopted motion of February 4 has not led to any (visible) action or (interim) reporting to date).
- The government commissioner has set her sights on the ferry connection and defends this variant against a reasonably close cooperating Island Council. In short, a subject that matters and in which the government commissioner has no intention of standing up for the population or approaching the Island Council.

The day before Friday's Island Council meeting, the BES Reporter reported ¹ that on Saba the call was heard to work together with the three islands to make a start: of the mutual connections between the BES islands with the deployment of EZ Air and SXM Airways.

Then it's one day later. On "Bonaire.nu" you can read the message ² today that as of December 6 Winair will fly again (temporarily!) three times a week from Sint Maarten to Bonaire. Furthermore, the frequency of flights to St. Eustatius and Saba will be (temporarily!) increased. Strategically Winair sees the ferry of course as a competitor and also a possible initiative of the three BES islands is not automatically met with friendship by Winair. Hence their commitment to flex their muscles and increase the frequency of flights on Bonaire and Sint Eustatius and Saba.

We have seen this kind of action by Winair before and it is generally temporary in nature. It is like fighting the COVID19 virus. A short hit may be enough, then we can go back to normal. It all seems strategically aimed at maintaining the monopoly and frustrating initiatives like ferry and alternative and competitive flight connections. The idea of competition (with possible customer-friendly price consequences) is absolutely foreign to Winair. Consolidation of its own position and driving out competition is the only thing Winair pursues. For the record: Winair maintains the flights (from upwind to downwind and vice versa) with leased and oversized aircraft and in a normal competitive situation is expected to lose out to the combination EZ Air SXM Airways. But of course there are other forces.

The owner of Winair is the government of Sint Maarten (about 92 percent) and the government of the Netherlands (about 8 percent). What is the position of St. Eustatius in relation to this development? I can think of the following two scenarios:

¹ <https://bes-reporter.com/dave-levenstone-ump-calls-on-island-governments-to-make-bes-air-connection-work/>

² <https://bonaire.nu/2021/11/20/winair-gaat-weer-drie-keer-per-week-op-bonaire-vliegen/>

- Winair and St. Maarten themselves come up with this strategic move and the Netherlands knows nothing about it (so State Secretary Knops is also surprised and the government commissioner is also ignorant). In that case I would think that Winair, as always, is capricious in its behavior, hoping with this "short blow" to discourage initiatives of the competition after which it soon falls back into the old (and not very customer-friendly) behavior: all flights via Sint Maarten, expensive and less frequent connections to Bonaire as well as Sint Eustatius. The rise and fall of the CN-Express is the shining example. The blame will be given to the customer who does not show up en masse. But then again, without any marketing and with a poor ability to buy tickets, even the best market alternative doesn't get off the ground, or at least badly.
- Winair and its two owners (so also European Netherlands) know about this development. After all, the Netherlands is the big promoter of the ferry (not the islands of St. Eustatius or Saba) and does not want to know anything about any competition. The ferry should not be "attacked" by Winair, and certainly not by a competitor from outside (as EZ Air and SXM Airways will be seen to be). It is incumbent on the Netherlands, and therefore on the government commissioner, not to come up with alternatives by air: all efforts are focused on the ferry! But in that case the government commissioner is guilty of something that is seen as a political mortal sin in political Holland: namely withholding relevant information.

I may hope that the Saban, Statian and Bonairean government will succeed in finding each other in the renewed proposal heard on Saba to get the connections between the BES islands off the ground in a sustainable way with EZ Air and SXM Airways. Furthermore, I hope that these connections can be provided by the Netherlands with the designation "public transport" (or as a PSO [public service obligation] as mentioned in the SEO report "Connectivity Caribbean part of the Kingdom" [30 July 2018]).

It is up to you - the Kingdom Relations Committee - to act as a catalyst to get this process going and to keep it going. Perhaps by also involving and activating other committees of your House (e.g. of I&W: cc: addressed) in this. For which of course I am very grateful.

With kind regards,

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Cc: Chairman and members of the Infrastructure and Water Management Committee