

OPENING REMARKS

Belize Open Week 2018 Event

October 31st, 2018

Best Western Belize Biltmore Plaza

A pleasant good morning: it is my pleasure to provide some opening remarks as we commence Day II of the Belize Open Week, multi stakeholder dialogue roundtables. On behalf of the Belize Bureau of Standards and by extension the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Commerce, I welcome you all.

Our small department is pleased and humbled by this invitation to participate in this first ever Belize Open Week. The Bureau has proudly made an indelible mark on improving the way it interacts with its clients through E-governance. Let me add that this mean or tool by which it now has enhanced the way it interacts, is the culmination of what was conceived more than a decade ago in a small office on the north wing of the East Block building on Independence Hill, as simply a stand-alone database concept, designed in Microsoft Access. Fast tracking to the present the Bureau has now paved the way for like departments to come onboard on this transformational virtual journey. [But] before I speak to this significant accomplishment, please allow me to sensitize you about who we are in what to some, may appear to be just a speck in this universe [nebula] of government departments.

First off, the BBS within the existing legal framework, is charged with a dual role to develop Belize's National Quality Infrastructure and to administrate an import and export licensing regime.

This mandate to develop Belize's National Quality Infrastructure (NQI) is underpinned by an existing legal framework rooted in the

pillars of Standards, Metrology, Conformity Assessment [insert footnote] and Accreditation. These pillars combined, represent an integrated system that serves to ensure that Belize can effectively participate in a global market place, at the same time, in the vein of public goods, providing a blanket of trust and confidence for consumers as it relates to fairness in trade, health and safety and the environment.

With the support of central government and donor agencies, regional and international, the department has made significant progress in developing the pillars of Standards and Metrology, demonstrably so with the latter, considering the launching and installation of new metrology laboratories in April of 2017. With funding from the EU Belize Rural Development Project II and the GOB, the lab was constructed at an approximate cost of \$3.2 million Belize dollars, which includes the cost of the physical structure and laboratory equipment. With Standards and Metrology on an upward development path, the department now seeks to direct its efforts to develop the third pillar, Conformity Assessment. This will ensure that this integrated system bears out through a compliance framework, one that not only falls within the Bureau's remit but an all-encompassing network of institutions: regulatory, statutory bodies and industry.

Now to redirect to the substance of today's participation, the Bureau in the exercise of its mandate under the import and export licensing regime unavoidably and in the true essence of the workings of government, is required to interact with the public daily. This interaction was purely face to face considering the physical need for an approval of licenses, leaving the client with no other option but to be subjected to a bureaucratic process which unfortunately continues to plague other government departments to this very day.

Little over a decade, we had a vision that would change the way the department would conduct its business. 10 years ago, or so, application for both an export and import license was wholly paper based. The department at the time felt that there was a need to shed this archaic process in recognition of the desire to be more efficient, transparent and cost effective. One way this was envisioned was for the client and unit to interact in a virtual space, the significance of which would mean the need to establish a platform, for this to take flight.

This archaic process entailed persons coming from every length and breadth of this country to our offices in Belmopan with paper applications that took time to approve, stamp and process. This process was viewed as time consuming, inefficient and very costly as it required physical movement of applicants considering that it was not an isolated process given the involvement of other agencies such as regulators, ministries and other departments. Needless to say, it not only added but compounded inefficiencies at every level.

So, in 2011, the BBS through funding from the International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) of the Taiwanese Government, not to mention the unwavering support from the Central Information and Technology Office (CITO), pursued the development of a virtual platform which would have allowed virtual connectivity between institution and client. This system would be so named as the Supplies Control Unit Online Licensing System (SCU-OLS). With the introduction of the SCU-OLS, the BBS would become the first GOB department to introduce the first of its kind, an electronic permit/licenses based system. This platform took the software engineers four years to develop and after its piloting stages, the system went live on January 2015. Now our client base of just below 500 users, can interact with our department by applying at their convenience for an export/import license. The

transition to this new virtual system lead to some clear advantages. The SCU-OLS process was initiated by a Customer registration field which gave users access to the online system via its web page. Products and brands could be added as per customer request and some form of traceability was made available through its limited reporting capabilities. This was certainly a break through from the manual system, as licenses could now be approved within 24 hours thereby providing for improved efficiency.

With the hope that this accomplishment would catch fever, the department did not settle at this milestone. Since the application for licenses operate in a sea of processes, the department sought to reel in other agencies that interact with its process. As such, the OLS would serve as a necessary trigger for the unfolding of a bigger and more expansive virtual system that would eventually integrate the services of other agencies. This reeling or pushing was felt necessary since it made absolutely no sense to operate a virtual licence and permit system parallel to a paper-based system, especially where some ministries and departments are connected at the hip. With the pulse for a virtual platform emanating strongly, the OLS served as the pivot to drive for an integrated system, the objective of which, would eliminate a paper-based system altogether.

With the continued support of the Taiwanese Government, the SCU would pursue a single window for permits and licenses, limited of course to specific commodities under the import and export license regime. This new system would be known as the Belize Electronic License and Permits System (BELAPS) and now represents a graduated, paperless platform that would now see clients interacting with multiple ministries, departments and statutory bodies.

With more reporting capabilities, the BELAPS has registration links to several platforms and is now linked to ASYCUDA. The status of

each phase of application can now be prompted to clients via their inbox and no supporting form is necessary. These characteristics certainly display a major improvement when compared to the SCU-OLS and ultimately provides more efficiency and reliability to all clients. The BELAPS will be piloted in November with the hope that it will go live in January of 2019.

The Bureau views its effort as the planting of the proverbial seed which now will grow and branch out to a network of institutions that can now collectively, in real time, interact with clients in a virtual space. How far we have come from the tiny seed that was planted at the East Block Building on Independence Hill. It shows that having the vision for change and being stubborn for change can be transformational. Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, the global market place is evolving and so must the institutions that help to facilitate the necessary and absolute integration. The Bureau therefore joins this national effort to fully embrace e-government and most importantly ensuing policies that will foster its further growth and development.

I thank you for this wonderful opportunity and welcome you once again.