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BAHAMIAN TRADE MISSION

A sunny destination for business

By Natalie Myers,
 PBN Staff Writer

*First in a series on a four-day
 trade mission to the
 Bahamas.*

We arrived in Nassau, the
 Bahamas, yesterday at 1:10
 p.m.

"It's not hot enough for me,"
 said Keith W. Stokes, director
 of the Newport County
 Chamber of Commerce, half
 joking, as we stepped off the
 plane onto the sunny tarmac.

Just five hours earlier, our
 nine-person delegation had
 been slightly shivery as we
 waited to board the plane that
 would take us to the
 Bahamas, an overcast Rhode
 Island sky shading our
 departure.

Chris Lee, a principal of North
 Kingstown-based Sea Fresh
 USA, said he hadn't been to
 Nassau since spring break in
 college. John Nunes, co-owner
 of Newport Vineyards, said
 the same as we rode from our
 hotel to an informal reception
 at the home of the charge de
 affairs for the U.S. Embassy,
 Brendt Hardt.

But things have changed since
 then, both in the Bahamas
 and with its visitors.

Lee and Nunes chose to join a
 four-day trade mission –
 organized by Maureen Mezei,
 international trade director at
 the R.I. Economic
 Development Corporation,
 through the R.I. National Guard's year-and-a-half old State Partnership Program –
 because they see the Bahamas as a potential market for their goods.

The trip is "more exploratory than anything," Nunes said. His family has owned
 Newport Vineyards for 12 harvests and over the last 10 years has grown from
 harvesting 10 acres to harvesting 50 acres.

But the company rarely sells wine outside one-hour-drive radius of the vineyards. It
 doesn't have to, because Newport tourists keep sales up.

The question Nunes will try to answer during the next few days: What if the same
 tourists who buy his wine in Newport would travel to the Bahamas and buy the
 wine here as well?

And if it is a possibility ... how would that work?

Others on the trade mission – including John Grosvenor, CEO and co-founder of
 Newport Collaborative, the largest architecture firm in the state, and Eric
 Offenber, founder of Middletown-based North East Engineers – came along to find
 a market for their services in the Bahamas.

And Stokes came to start exploring potential marketing ties between the Bahamian
 tourism market and the Newport tourism market. He also came to share cultural
 heritage tourism best practices at a business development seminar hosted by the
 Bahamas Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Embassy and the Bahamas Development
 Bank.

Gov. Michael Messinger's objective is to grow and expand the R.I. National Guard's



PBN PHOTO / NATALIE MYERS

THE TRADE MISSION was welcomed to the
 Bahamas with a reception yesterday at the
 home of Brendt Hardt, charge de affairs for the
 U.S. Embassy in Nassau. From left, Eric
 Offenber, founder of Middletown-based North
 East Engineers, and Keith W. Stokes, director of
 the Newport County Chamber, talk with Hardt
 during the party.

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