

Honorable Chairman James, esteemed members of the Committee, distinguished guests, and fellow citizens,

I am Janelle K. Sarauw, a former senator and a steadfast advocate for the cultural vibrancy and economic prosperity of our beloved Virgin Islands. It is with a deep sense of responsibility and commitment that I stand before you today to provide comprehensive testimony regarding the legislation that established the Division of Festivals within the Department of Tourism.

The genesis of this legislation, conceived in collaboration with Senator Myron Jackson, was rooted in a vision of fostering parity among the islands of our archipelago while celebrating and preserving the rich tapestry of our cultural heritage. We sought to establish a framework that would empower each island to showcase its unique attributes and traditions, thereby instilling a sense of pride and identity among our people and captivating visitors with the authenticity of our cultural offerings.

The pivotal decision to relocate the Virgin Islands Cultural and Heritage Institute to sit within the Department of Tourism was a strategic move aimed at synergizing efforts to promote and preserve our cultural legacy. By integrating the Institute's resources and expertise into the Division of Festivals, we envisioned a dynamic platform that would not only showcase traditional festivals like Carnival but also spotlight lesser-known cultural gems such as film festivals, food festivals, and literary events.

Regrettably, despite the noble intentions behind the legislation, the implementation has fallen short of our expectations. While Carnival and Festivals remain a cornerstone of our cultural calendar, other cultural initiatives have languished, and the full spectrum of our cultural diversity remains largely untapped. The defunct state of the Virgin Islands Cultural and Heritage Institute stands as a stark reminder of the unfulfilled promise of our legislation and the urgent need for course correction.

Moreover, the original intent of establishing a territorial director, supported by assistant directors for each island, was to ensure comprehensive oversight and equitable distribution of resources. Central to our legislative mandate was the imperative of accountability and transparency in the management of public funds. Yet, despite efforts to enhance procurement standards and streamline operations, there remains a glaring lack of clarity regarding the return on investment of our cultural events. While anecdotal evidence may abound of the positive impact of festivals on tourism and local economies, the absence of robust metrics and financial reporting hampers our ability to assess the true efficacy and value proposition of these initiatives.

While commendable, the attendance at professional football games and carnivals merely scratches the surface of cultural immersion. To truly gauge the efficacy and breadth of the Division's endeavors, one must venture into the realms of cinematic exploration at film festivals, revel in the melodic fabric of international jazz festivals like St. Lucia's, and savor the culinary delights showcased at events such as Taste the World. Are these diverse cultural expressions accorded the same degree of attention and investment as our flagship carnivals and festivals, or do we inadvertently perpetuate a myopic focus on traditional festivities as the sole litmus test of success? The Division must broaden their horizons and embrace a more expansive conception of cultural

engagement, one that celebrates the richness and diversity of human expression in all its myriad forms.

As of present, St. Croix remains devoid of an assistant director within the Division of Festivals, while the Department of Tourism conspicuously boasts two assistant Commissioners and two Deputy Commissioners, emblematic of a top-heavy administrative structure. In deliberating upon this legislation, it is incumbent upon this esteemed body to engage in a rigorous examination of pertinent inquiries:

Firstly, it behooves you to scrutinize the degree of autonomy afforded to assistant directors in articulating and executing their island-specific objectives and initiatives. Are these individuals empowered to wield substantive influence in decision-making processes, or are their efforts stifled by bureaucratic constraints and centralized directives?

Secondly, you must ascertain the extent to which the voices of assistant directors resonate within the echelons of authority. Are their perspectives solicited and valued in shaping policy frameworks and operational strategies, or do they find themselves marginalized within the hierarchical landscape of the Department?

Lastly, you must interrogate the notion of parity within the Division of Festivals, both in terms of resource allocation and decision-making authority. Is there equitable distribution of resources and opportunities among the islands, or do disparities persist, perpetuating a sense of inequity and disenfranchisement?

In essence, the efficacy of the proposed legislation hinges upon your ability to address these critical questions and confront the systemic challenges that undermine the equitable and effective governance of our cultural assets.

In the event that tangible evidence contradicts the aforementioned observations, the proposed restructuring advocated by Senator Franklin Johnson emerges as a promising avenue for revitalizing the Division of Festivals. This restructuring offers a unique opportunity to recalibrate the division's objectives, aligning them more closely with the original vision articulated in the legislation. Through the decentralization of leadership and the delegation of greater autonomy to island directors, we can cultivate an environment wherein local communities are empowered to assume stewardship of their cultural heritage. This approach prioritizes authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability, fostering a dynamic and participatory cultural landscape.

Thank you for your attention and this concludes my testimony.