

Thirty-Fifth Legislature of the Virgin Islands  
Committee of Economic Development and Agriculture

Honorable Javan E. James, Chairman

Testimony on the Act amending Title 3 Virgin Islands Code,  
Chapter 19, Section 399A Relating to Division of Festivals  
Eliminating the Assistant Directors, Increasing the Number of  
Directors

Submitted by  
Rena Francis  
St. Croix Resident, Booth Owner

**Rena Francis – Resident Booth Owner**

RE: Testimony on the Act amending Title 3 Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 19, Section 399A

Good day the Honorable Senator Javan E. James, Chair of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, Honorable Senator, Franklin D. Johnson, Bill sponsorer, and other Committee Members and Senators present. I am Rena Francis, a resident of St. Croix Virgin Islands and a longtime booth owner in the Crucian Christmas Festival (Festival). I submit to you my support for the proposed amendments to Title 3 Virgin Islands Code, Section 339a in its entirety.

Over the years, I have witness changes in manner in which our Festival have been managed. I have learned to navigate those changes in hope for better conditions and an improved Festival season. Over the years I have celebrated the successes as well as suffered through the results changes.

The establishment of the Division of Festival within the Department of Tourism as amended by Law in the year 2019 was celebrated by many. The anticipated improvements under the leadership of the Division of Festivals were value added to cultural and festival experience, transparency, equity, and accountability.

The first year of the Festival under the leadership of the Division of Tourism, was very challenging. The maximum number of booth increased from by approximately 15. That year, for instance, the electrical demand to the power grid resulting in my booth being without power for half of Festival season. My operation was adversely affected. However, I commended Shamari Haynes, Assistant Director – Division of Tourism for his constant communications and presence in attempt to address my electrical challenges. In the end, I dubbed it Growing Pains that accompany changes. Thus, over the years I continued to be supportive, hopeful and fluid.

Fast forward from Festival 2019-2020, I observed the activities taking place throughout the community during the 2023-2024 Crucian Christmas Festival season. Observations and questions pondered by me and others are

- why is the Division of Tourism sponsoring activities, less than a mile away from the Festival Village grounds, taking away from and competing with its very own product;

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- why is the Festival Village activities scheduled to end at midnight when it is customary to operate until 2 am on weekend;
- why do booth owners have to communicate with the Director of Festival over on the island of St. Thomas, who is not familiar with our needs;
- why is communication with booth owners relegated to a WhatsApp group chat;
- when will there be representation for the booth owners in a form of a Booth Owners Association for example;
- why was projected the cost of the booth doubled when the number of days of the season reduced almost to half;
- how are funds allocated to each of the Virgin Islands celebrations (Virgin Islands Carnival, Crucian Christmas Festival, St. John Celebration);
- how are funds being expended;
- are we getting the best efforts on our behalf;
- why is our entertainment in the Village not on par with our sister island; and
- who is the Festival Village grounds manager that is present on the grounds during the hours of operations to address emergencies?

While the Assistant Director of Festival appears to lead the Festival on St. Croix, his efforts and passion this past season did not mirror that in 2019. Questions are being answered or ignored in the WhatsApp communication by the Director leaving me with a feeling of disenfranchisement. Who do I look to for accountability?

In summary, I would like to commend the Department of Tourism for the job their have done with promoting our islands' celebration. The Bill amendment of Title 3, Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 19 Section 339a appointing a director for each island will further the improvement in the cultural and festival experience, transparency, equity, and accountability. Each director will be held accountable for representing each island in creating a festive and cultural experience, be the point of contact with issues surrounding the islands' celebrations, remain transparent in management of funds and the tourism and cultural product representative of their respective island, and will answer to the people they serve.

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Thank you senators for the opportunity to present today. Thank you Senator Johnson for your vision and sponsorship of the Bill aimed to continuous improvement for our celebrations under the Division of Tourism.