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Testimony on Bill 35-0396

November 13, 2024



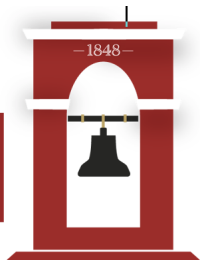
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Good Morning, Senator Javan James, Sr., Chairman of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, Committee Members, Senators of the 35th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Shomari Moorehead, President of Our Town Frederiksted (OTF), a non-profit organization dedicated to the community development and revitalization of Frederiksted.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Bill 35-0396, an Act requiring the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism to reestablish weekly Harbor Night events in Frederiksted, St. Croix. Our Town Frederiksted wholeheartedly welcomes the long-awaited return of Harbor Nights to the town of Frederiksted, an event that brought significant economic activity to businesses and vendors.

Our Town Frederiksted is part of a coalition of non-profit organizations that has received funding from the Bryan-Roach administration to host events and attract economic activity to our town centers. Since Governor Bryan announced the award in September, Our Town Frederiksted successfully hosted the inaugural Rhythms at Sunset, and has scheduled a monthly series of concerts to be held on the third Fridays of each month. OTF has also planned a calendar of activities also designed to bring traffic and economic activity to Frederiksted.

While we support the intention of Bill 35-0396, we do not believe the Virgin Islands Government should bear the full responsibility for the execution of Harbor Nights. Instead, we believe this represents a prime opportunity for public-private partnerships. In fact, Harbor Nights started as a private, non-profit led endeavor that successfully grew due to a public partnership. Considering the confidence exhibited by the Bryan-Roach administration in Our Town Frederiksted to be a leader in bringing activities back to the town, we anticipate that Harbor Nights could be a community-led event, as well.

The Government's efforts should be focused on improving infrastructure, fully establishing the water, provisioning, and other incentives to support extended port stays, and supporting the development of attractions that bolster St. Croix's overall tourism product.

Our second concern centers on the inclusion of casino gaming pop-ups, off-track betting, and internet gaming operations as part of the Harbor Night experience. The introduction of pop-up casinos and casino gaming detracts from the family friendly environment that has traditionally been associated with Harbor Nights. Any casino gaming activity in Frederiksted should fulfill the intent of the Casino Gaming Act, which is intended to stimulate hotel and hotel room development.

Our Town Frederiksted supports Bill 35-0396, conditioned on the removal of the provisions regarding pop-up gaming kiosks, and on the inclusion of funding to support the water and electrical infrastructure upgrades needed to keep ships in port longer.

Our Town Frederiksted appreciates any initiative that promotes the island of St. Croix and looks forward to being part of bringing Harbor Nights back to Frederiksted.

