



**GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM**

November 7, 2025

The Honorable Senator Hubert L. Frederick
Thirty-Six (36th) Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00802

Re: Testimony for the Committee of Economic Development and Agriculture

Dear Senator Frederick:

Please find the Department of Tourism's testimony herein for the meeting of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, at 11:00 am on November 10, 2025, at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall on the island of St. Thomas.

Sincerely,


Jennifer Matarangas-King
Commissioner Nominee
USVI Department of Tourism

**Testimony before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture
36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands
November 10, 2025**

Good morning, Economic Development and Agriculture Committee Chairman, Honorable Senator Hubert L. Frederick, Committee Members, and Senators of the 36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands, legislative staff, members of the media, and the listening and viewing audience.

I am Commissioner-Nominee Jennifer Matarangas-King; pursuant to your invitation, I am here with members of the Department of Tourism staff, including Assistant Commissioner of Communications and Marketing Alani Henneman, Director of Festivals Ian Turnbull, Assistant Director of Festivals (St. Croix) Alvin Burke, and Director of Administration and Management Jamila Miller, to provide the committee with an update on the Department of Tourism's operations, performance, and initiatives.

Before we delve into the testimony, I am excited to share that we have just deployed the first version of my inter-territory newsletter, "The V.I. Desk Side," last week. This bimonthly newsletter is designed to engage and inform the community and key local partners about key marketing events and projects. To remain successful, everyone in our community must have a 'Vested Interest' in our tourism product to ensure our destination remains competitive and top-of-mind. Each issue will spotlight all three islands, highlight upcoming events, and feature tips on Google Optimization to help boost visibility for local businesses. My goal is to strengthen community connections, raise awareness, and highlight the department's hard work.

The Department of Tourism is and continues to thrive as the catalyst that drives more than 60 percent of the Territory's GDP. From expanded air service to increased cruise calls, the Territory is surging ahead as a major player in the Caribbean tourism space, further solidifying our known belief that the U.S. Virgin Islands is one of the best places in the world.

As mandated, the Department of Tourism leads all marketing efforts for the Territory, executing this role through a comprehensive mix of strategies that include traditional and digital advertising, media relations, social media engagement, and strategic partnerships. These integrated efforts have strengthened the Virgin Islands' position in the global tourism marketplace, earning top industry recognition from Caribbean Journal, HSMAI, and ESTO, as well as coverage in leading outlets such as Travel & Leisure, Condé Nast Traveler, Travel Noire, Black Enterprise, El Diario, Caribbean Journal, and iHeart Radio.

Social media remains one of the Department's most dynamic outreach channels, expanding our visibility across various platforms, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Threads, and TikTok. These platforms allow us to deliver authentic, consistent messaging to both broad and niche audiences—guiding potential visitors from awareness to engagement, and ultimately to booking and arrival.

Targeted initiatives have also driven measurable results. The St. Croix-focused VIBE promotion, which offers a \$250 per-person airfare credit redeemable at participating hotels, has attracted nearly 1,500 visitors and distributed over \$375,000 to hotel partners. Additionally, our sports and entertainment partnerships in key markets—including collaborations with the Chicago Cubs, Boston Red Sox, New York Mets, and New York Jets—have significantly increased visibility and contributed to a 20% rise in bookings, as well as expanded airlift into the Territory.

Together with our agency partners, the Department continues to explore and invest in innovative, data-driven opportunities to reach potential travelers and diversify our target audiences. As a direct result of these collective marketing initiatives, the Department generated an estimated \$306 million in attributable hotel revenue in 2025, underscoring the strength and effectiveness of our strategic approach.

Last year, the Territory welcomed more than 2.6 million visitors, a milestone driven by the steady expansion of airlift into the U.S. Virgin Islands, a trend that continues to gain momentum. New routes, including American Airlines' flight from Chicago to St. Croix and Southwest Airlines' service from Orlando and Baltimore to St. Thomas, represent many years of strategic collaboration and relationship building. Inter-island connectivity has also strengthened, with Cape Air and Contour Airlines offering new options to and from St. Maarten, St. Kitts, Nevis, and Saint Barthélemy. Looking ahead, air service across the Territory is expected to reach record levels once again, with 2026 seat capacity projected to increase by 5% over 2024, which was a record-breaking year that welcomed nearly one million overnight guests.

The Department's close relationships with airline partners have been central to this success. Our team actively engages with carriers year-round and maintains a strong presence at major industry conferences, including Routes World and Routes America, to secure additional opportunities for the Territory.

Meanwhile, overnight stays continue to rise as new and renovated properties open across all three islands, expanding the diversity and quality of accommodations. According to Adara, the U.S. Virgin Islands currently ranks first in the Caribbean for average daily rate (ADR) at \$664, underscoring the destination's strength and appeal in the marketplace.

Cruise tourism is also on an upward trajectory. St. Croix alone has seen a 29% increase in cruise arrivals, reaching 218,000 passengers in 2025, with a Territory-wide increase of 4% projected for 2026. Data shared at the recent Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) conference highlighted the U.S. Virgin Islands' strong performance, ranking #2 in on-island spend (\$166.22 per passenger) and #1 in port calls in the Eastern Caribbean. As with the airline sector, these results are the product of sustained relationship-building and collaboration. The Department

continues to maintain strong ties with key cruise partners and organizations, ensuring the Territory remains a preferred destination for global travelers arriving by air and sea alike.

The numbers support the effectiveness of our team's efforts, as the TARF continues to bring in above-par collections year-to-date, exceeding \$52 million as of September 2025, which is 7% above 2024.

Locally, the team is growing with new hires and promotions in both districts, filling critical positions, including a new Director of Visitor Experiences for each district, as well as a Communications and Social Media Specialist in St. Croix. With the new additions, the current staffing levels are 14 employees in the St. Croix district and 17 employees in the St. Thomas/St. John district, and three offshore employees, eliminating any previous disparities, and aligning with burgeoning programmatic needs, visitor arrivals, and the operational scale of tourism activities in each district. By the end of the year, we will be able to bring on a few more staff members, including a dedicated cultural ambassador. The Department will continue to review staffing levels annually to ensure equitable resource distribution, support economic impact across districts, and align personnel with tourism development priorities.

Over the next 90 days, my team will focus heavily on enhancing the visitor experience by hiring new greeters across the territory to improve the welcome and departure experience at all ports and entryways. Entertainment is scheduled to return to all ports throughout our destination. With the addition of our new Welcome Center locations, we've also added additional restrooms in both districts. We will continue to work with our partners on St. Croix to ensure we have porta-potties at Cane Bay on heavy cruise days as well. Tied into the visitor experience, the Department maintains a single public restroom facility in St. Thomas, located at the Welcome Center. The Virgin Islands Port Authority and the Virgin Islands Department of Public Works manage all other public restrooms throughout the territory.

As we approach this year's Crucian Christmas Festival, the addition of a new Assistant Director of Festivals, Alvin Burke, adds integral support to the Division and the on-the-ground planning efforts. Active planning is still underway, with cross-departmental collaboration among the VI Police Department, Department of Public Works, VI Waste Management Authority, Department of Planning & Natural Resources, Fire & Emergency Medical Services, VI Port Authority, and Sports Parks & Recreation. Earlier this morning, we released the updated Festival schedule, which was shifted following discussions with VIPD around safety concerns and the village performance lineup. This year, more than 20 local performers and bands will take to the festival stage, including Pumpa, VIO International, Adam O, Stanley & the Ten Sleepless Knights, Black Empire, Spectrum Band, and more, in addition to longstanding events such as the Calypso and Soca Monarch competitions, which will showcase our rich and diverse culture.

From restroom accessibility along the parade and J'ouvert routes and in the village, to crowd control and adjacent events, the Department of Tourism and our counterparts are dedicated to facilitating a world-class Festival that is memorable for both locals and visitors alike.

In closing, we would like to thank The Honorable Albert Bryan, Jr., Governor of the US Virgin Islands, The Honorable Tregenza Roach, Lieutenant Governor of the US Virgin Islands, former Commissioner Boschulte, all our associated departments, members of the Senate, our dedicated

volunteers, and my phenomenal colleagues at the Department of Tourism for their unwavering commitment to elevating the U.S. Virgin Islands, our culture, and our traditions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We stand ready to answer any questions you may have.