



**UNITED STATES
VIRGIN ISLANDS**
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U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism
P.O. Box 6400
St. Thomas, USVI 00804

April 8, 2026

Honorable Senator Hubert Frederick
Chairman, Economic Development and Agriculture
36th Legislature
Fritz E. Lawaetz
Christiansted, St. Croix 00802

Re: Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture

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

I am Commissioner Jennifer Matarangas-King, here pursuant to your request to speak on sustainable economic development and the vital role tourism plays in shaping the future of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Joining me in the chamber today is Assistant Commissioner of Marketing, Alani Henneman.

Tourism is the cornerstone of our economy, but more importantly, it is a key driver of economic opportunity across our islands. It supports jobs, fuels small businesses, and generates critical revenue that sustains our broader economy. As such, our responsibility is not only to grow tourism, but to ensure that growth is strategic, inclusive, and delivers long-term economic benefits to our people.

That responsibility is especially important as we continue to see strong demand. In the first quarter of 2026 alone, we welcomed a record 303,388 visitors—an increase of 12% year-over-year and 6% over 2024 levels. St. Thomas continues to lead this growth, with arrivals up 15% year-over-year and 11% over 2024, while St. Croix saw a 2% increase year-over-year. These numbers reinforce the strength of our tourism product and highlight the opportunity to drive more balanced economic growth across the territory.

Our approach is intentional. We are focused on sustainable economic development—growth that strengthens our economy, expands opportunities for our residents, and ensures long-term stability for the territory.

Today, that work is guided by several key priorities.

First, we are focused on driving economic impact across our communities. Tourism must benefit more than just our core visitor areas; it must create opportunities for local entrepreneurs, small businesses, and cultural practitioners. Our brand speaks directly to preserving and sustaining our culture, and through strategic festivals and key sponsorships, we continue to promote tradition



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while ensuring the longevity of our signature events. These efforts generate revenue and visibility for local artisans, vendors, and performers, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed more broadly throughout the community.

Second, we are strengthening our workforce and investing in the next generation. Sustainable economic development begins with a vested community and requires a pipeline of talent prepared to lead this industry. Through our partnerships with the University of the Virgin Islands, as well as collaborative programs with the Caribbean Tourism Organization and the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association, we are actively engaging the younger generation. These initiatives introduce our youth to the wide range of careers within tourism, helping to build a skilled, competitive, and locally rooted workforce that understands both the value of the industry and the importance of environmental sustainability.

Third, we are strategically positioning and marketing the destination to drive quality growth. This includes attracting visitors who are seeking authentic, culturally rich, and experience-driven, off-the-beaten-path travel. By aligning our marketing efforts with higher-value experiences—including eco-tourism, wellness, and cultural immersion—we are increasing visitor spending, extending length of stay, and maximizing economic return while maintaining the integrity of our product.

Fourth, we continue to support and enhance key sectors that contribute to our tourism economy, including our marine and yachting industries. We are working closely with the marine community, including the Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association (VIPCA), the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), and the St. Croix and St. Thomas Yacht Clubs, to advance initiatives focused on protecting our seas and sustaining our marine resources. Through regattas and special programs, these partnerships help drive economic activity while reinforcing our commitment to environmental stewardship.

Finally, we recognize that protecting our natural assets is directly tied to our economic success. Our beaches, waters, and landscapes are not only part of our identity—they are economic drivers. Efforts to promote responsible tourism and protect these resources ensure that we remain competitive as a destination and can sustain visitation over the long term.

As we look ahead, sustainable economic development is about building an economy that is resilient, inclusive, and positioned for long-term growth. Tourism will continue to play a central role in that effort, but it must be managed in a way that delivers real and lasting benefits to the people of the Virgin Islands.

We are committed to doing this work in partnership—with the Legislature, our local partners, our communities, and our industry stakeholders—to ensure that we are not only growing, but growing in a way that strengthens our economy and supports our people.



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Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to continuing this conversation and working together to advance sustainable economic development for the U.S. Virgin Islands.