THE HONORABLE SENATOR AVERY L. LEWIS

Legislative Secretary

36TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Chair: **Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, Consumer Protection**

Vice Chair: **Committee on Education and Workforce Development**

Member: **Committee on Rules and Judiciary**
Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, and Parks
Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety
Committee of the Whole

Location: Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands

On February 10, 2026, the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection convened at the Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room on St. Croix to receive testimony on matters related to the Territory's marine economy, tourism and festival operations, and to consider measures recognizing individuals and families for their outstanding contributions to the Virgin Islands community.

During this meeting, the Committee received testimony concerning the economic impact of newly implemented British Virgin Islands charter vessel licensing fees, the operational status and strategic initiatives of the Department of Tourism and Division of Festivals, and several legislative measures honoring distinguished Virgin Islanders and families for their service, cultural preservation, and community contributions. The Committee considered **Bill No. 36-0150**, which honors and commends the late Thelma Leona Petersen-Springer for her lifelong dedication to mentoring youth and serving the community; **Bill No. 36-0225**, recognizing Sharon Maria Williams for her decades of service in education and the culinary arts; **Bill No. 36-0226**, honoring Janet Brow Phillips for her leadership in education, parental engagement initiatives, and culinary contributions; and **Bill No. 36-0227**, recognizing the Armstrong Family for their multigenerational entrepreneurial legacy and cultural impact through Armstrong Ice Cream.

Testimony presented throughout the meeting reflected broad perspectives from industry leaders, government agencies, community members, educators, and cultural advocates.

In Block I:

The Committee received testimony providing a comprehensive overview of charter vessel industry impacts due to the British Virgin Islands' newly implemented charter vessel licensing fees and related challenges facing the Territory's Blue Economy.

Invited Testifiers were as follows:

- Mr. Kennon Jones, Executive Director, Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association
- Mr. Steve Schlosser, Paradise Yacht Management
- Mr. Kelvin Bailey Jr., Virgin Islands Gamefish
- Mr. Jay Pennington, Waypoints Yacht Charters

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Highlights of Testimonies:

Testifiers outlined significant economic challenges facing the Territory's marine industry, including declining vessel participation in local charter shows, shifting operations to the British Virgin Islands, and resulting economic losses. Testimony emphasized the urgent need for infrastructure investments, regulatory reform, workforce training, and regional collaboration to strengthen the Territory's marine industry and protect long-term economic sustainability.

Mr. Kennon Jones provided detailed testimony noting the increasing competitive disadvantage faced by U.S. Virgin Islands charter operators, highlighting vessel relocation, infrastructure limitations, and regulatory barriers affecting business operations. Testimony further included recommendations such as developing marine infrastructure, modernizing permitting processes, implementing workforce training initiatives, establishing business-friendly regulatory reforms, reviving sport fishing tourism opportunities, and prioritizing environmental stewardship through derelict vessel removal programs.

Committee members engaged in discussion regarding economic impacts, infrastructure development, and potential legislative strategies to support marine tourism and strengthen the Territory's Blue Economy.

In Block II:

The Committee received testimony on the operations of the Department of Tourism, including enabling laws, current departmental challenges, festival planning initiatives, and tourism marketing strategies.

Invited Testifier was as follows:

• Mrs. Jennifer Matarangas-King, Commissioner, Department of Tourism

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Highlights of Testimonies:

Representatives from the Department of Tourism provided an overview of the Territory's tourism outlook, reporting continued visitor growth and recognition through regional travel awards. Testimony highlighted the success of the Crucian Christmas Festival, which demonstrated strong community collaboration, cultural preservation, and economic engagement through vendor participation and tourism marketing campaigns.

Testifiers also provided updates regarding the expansion of tourism marketing initiatives, increased airlift capacity through new airline routes, and planning efforts for upcoming carnival celebrations across the Territory. The Department emphasized its commitment to enhancing visitor experiences, strengthening cultural programming, and supporting economic development through tourism and festival activities.

Committee members discussed festival planning, cultural preservation efforts, and strategies for sustaining tourism growth throughout the Territory.

In Block III:

Bill No. 36-0150: An Act honoring and commending Thelma Leona Petersen-Springer, posthumously, for her outstanding community service to the children and the people of the Virgin Islands. Proposed by Senator Kenneth L. Gittens.

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Invited Testifiers were as follows:

- Mr. Charles Nibbs, Community Activist
- Ms. Sheniqua Robinson, Frederiksted Majorette Former Twirler

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Highlights of Testimonies:

Testimony presented in support of Bill No. 36-0150 emphasized Ms. Petersen-Springer's lifelong dedication to mentoring youth, providing childcare services, supporting cultural programs, and fostering discipline, leadership, and self-confidence among generations of Virgin Islands youth. Testifiers described her impact as a community matriarch whose mentorship extended beyond traditional education and created safe, nurturing environments for children to grow and thrive.

In Block IV:

Bill No. 36-0225: A Resolution honoring and commending Sharon Maria Williams for her outstanding achievements and significant contributions to the fields of education and culinary arts. Proposed by Senator Kenneth L. Gittens.

Invited Testifiers were as follows:

- Ms. Edna Thomas, Retired Educator
- Mr. John Abramson, Retired Civil Servant
- Mrs. Jennifer Matarangas-King, Commissioner, Department of Tourism
- Hon. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., PhD, Commissioner, Department of Agriculture

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Highlights of Testimonies:

Testifiers highlighted Ms. Williams' decades-long career in education, mentorship of students across multiple generations, and contributions to culinary arts and cultural preservation. Testimony described her commitment to education, nutrition awareness, and cultural heritage through both teaching and culinary entrepreneurship. Testifiers emphasized her lasting influence on the Virgin Islands community and her role in promoting cultural identity through food and education.

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Bill No. 36-0226: A Resolution honoring and commending Mrs. Janet Brow Phillips for her outstanding achievements and significant contributions to the fields of education and culinary arts to the Virgin Islands community. Proposed by Senator Kenneth L. Gittens.

Invited Testifiers were as follows:

• Ms. Mona Barnes, Apostle
• Mr. Dennis Brow, Brother
• Mr. Victor Somme III, Assistant Commissioner of Virgin Islands Department of Education
• Mrs. Jennifer Matarangas-King, Commissioner, Department of Tourism
• Hon. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., PhD, Commissioner, Department of Agriculture

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Highlights of Testimonies:

Testimony in support of Mrs. Brow Phillips emphasized her leadership in education, including her creation of the Parent University Program, which provided parents with essential tools and resources to support student success. Testifiers also highlighted her exceptional culinary expertise, cultural preservation efforts, and longstanding community service. Testimony described her as a role model, educator, and cultural ambassador whose work has strengthened both education and culinary traditions in the Virgin Islands.

Bill No. 36-0227: A Resolution honoring and commending the Armstrong Family, long-time owners of Armstrong Ice Cream, for their exceptional contributions to the economic growth, cultural heritage, and development of the Virgin Islands. Proposed by Senator Kenneth L. Gittens.

Invited Testifiers were as follows:

• Ms. Claire Roker, Retired Civil Servant
• Reverend Florence Petersen, Pastor
• Mrs. Jennifer Matarangas-King, Commissioner, Department of Tourism
• Hon. Louis E. Petersen, Jr., PhD, Commissioner, Department of Agriculture

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Highlights of Testimonies:

Testimony presented in support of Bill No. 36-0227 highlighted the Armstrong Family's multigenerational entrepreneurial legacy and their cultural and economic contributions to the Territory through Armstrong Ice Cream. Testifiers emphasized the business's historical significance, role in heritage tourism, community engagement, youth mentorship, and its importance as a cultural landmark in the Virgin Islands.

COMMITTEE ACTION: THE VOTE

• Bill No. 36-0150: PASSED
• Bill No. 36-0225: PASSED
• Bill No. 36-0226: PASSED
• Bill No. 36-0227: PASSED

ATTENDANCE:

Committee Members: Senator Ray Fonseca, Senator Alma Francis Heyliger, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Senator Carla J. Joseph

Non-Committee Members: Senator Marvin J. Blyden, Senator Clifford Joseph, Senator Kurt Vialet