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U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Tourism
P.O. Box 6400
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February 9, 2026

The Honorable Senator Avery Lewis

Thirty-Six (36th) Legislature of the Virgin Islands
Capitol Building
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00802

Re: Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection

Good morning, Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection Committee Chairman, Honorable Senator Avery L. Lewis; members of the Committee; Senators of the 36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands; legislative staff; members of the media; and the listening and viewing public.

I am Ian Turnbull, Director of Festivals at the Department of Tourism. Pursuant to your invitation, I am here today on behalf of Commissioner Jennifer Matarangas-King, joined today by Assistant Director of Festivals for St. Croix, Alvin Burke, Jr, Assistant Director of Festivals for St. Thomas, Halvor Hart III, and Chief Financial Officer Kenneth Milligan. We are here to provide an update on the Department of Tourism and Division of Festivals' current status, core functions, and key initiatives.

Before addressing the specific items requested by this body, I would like to present 3 new marketing visuals that highlight the work of the Department—recapping the Crucian Christmas Festival, teeing up St. Thomas Carnival, and showcasing the impactful local efforts of our team.

The outlook for 2026 is bright for the U.S. Virgin Islands, anchored by continued growth in the tourism sector. We are excited about a year of elevation—showcasing the people, culture, and natural beauty of our home to the world. Since last appearing before this body, our team has expanded with the addition of Chief Financial Officer Kenneth Milligan and Cultural Program Coordinator Kendall "KC" Henry, strengthening staffing across districts and further supporting the Department's mandated mission to market the Territory as a premier global destination.

Territory-wide, we welcomed more than 2.5 million travelers by the close of calendar year 2025 and emerged as a regional leader in the 2026 Caribbean Travel Awards, earning honors including Experiential Destination of the Year, Caribbean Cruise Destination of the Year, and New Hotel of the Year for The Saint, St. John. In addition, just last week, Southwest Airlines launched two new nonstop flights to St. Thomas from Baltimore and Orlando, further enhancing access for key feeder markets and supporting our sustained passenger growth.

Crucian Christmas Festival delivered a remarkable return, marked by strengthened local collaboration and engagement. Partnerships with the University of the Virgin Islands and respected cultural guardians from the St. Croix district, including Papi Love, Samuel Sanes, Ruben Melendez, A.J. Ventura, and others, and the launch of the Road to Crucian Christmas Festival social campaign were central to this success. The preservation and passing of cultural traditions remained paramount as we hosted the Calypso and Soca Monarch competitions and



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crowned new Carnival royalty: Miss St. Croix Festival Queen Amenti Golden Philip, Junior Miss Lashonte Joseph, Princess Jaelyn Rodriguez, and Duchess Talia Simmonds.

During the Crucian Christmas Festival season, the RTPark Community Impact Fund Micro-Loan Program was launched and successfully supported small business participation by providing nine approved microloans for local vendors, creatives and booth operators.

This program delivered fast, affordable capital to help participants increase inventory, secure supplies, and expand offerings in time for peak festival traffic-directly strengthening on-the-ground economic activity during the festival. This program will also be extended to St. Thomas and St. John vendors for their respective Carnivals.

Signature events, such as J'ouvert, Food Fair, Children's Parade, and Adults Parade, showcased the very best of the Crucian spirit. For seven nights, Festival Village served as a hub of musical excellence, featuring homegrown and international talent including Pumba, Adam O, Mada Nile, Ras Batch, VIO International, Spectrum Band, Kenya Eugene, Par Tee Band, 411 Band, Morgan Heritage, Nadia Batson, D'Yani, Voice, Fay-Ann Lyons, Nikki Brooks, and Bunji Garlin. The celebration concluded with Kes the Band, whose global reach continues to grow, spreading messages of unity and love through soca music.

The success of the Crucian Christmas Festival extended beyond the island through a strategic media familiarization trip featuring Virgin Islands diaspora actress and singer Natori Naughton, influencer Danie Sierra Leguillou, and rapper Maino. Additionally, the group included radio personality Angela Yee, comedian Donnell Rawlings, chef and influencer Cassie Yeung, radio personality Swagy Sie, media outlet The Jasmine Brand, and renowned Carnival media company Trini Jungle Juice, among others. This initiative generated a reach of more than 12.4 million social media impressions and resulted in over \$18 million in earned media value.

As we look ahead to St. Thomas Carnival and St. John Celebration, in partnership with our community and industry stakeholders, we continue to evaluate and refine our offerings to ensure optimal experiences for both residents and visitors.

Planning for St. Thomas Carnival—under the theme “*Where Culture, Rhythm, and Good Times Mix*”—is well underway. Collaboration with district-based cultural leaders and innovative industry partners continues to guide our work, with a strong emphasis on highlighting the uniqueness of the U.S. Virgin Islands—our people, our sound, and our revelry. While still in the early stages, we hosted our first interagency planning meeting on January 30, 2026, with the Virgin Islands Police Department, Department of Public Works, Waste Management Authority, Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Fire and Emergency Medical Services, Port Authority, and Sports, Parks, and Recreation invited. Food Fair registration opened on February 1, Booth registration will open later this month, and registration for parades, boat races, J'ouvert, and external Village vendors will open in March. We are committed to delivering a world-class Carnival experience that is safe, vibrant, and memorable.

The work of the Division of Festivals extends beyond our “Three Reasons to Fete.” In collaboration with the broader Department of Tourism team, the Division continues to support major events



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across the Territory, including AgriFest as well as partnership activations in the mainland United States and abroad, creating immersive experiences that engage and inspire potential travelers.

Together, the Department and our agency partners continue to lead the industry through innovative marketing strategies that differentiate the Territory from our regional counterparts and sustain a strong share of voice, reflected in continued passenger growth. Our work does not end when visitors arrive; it continues on-island, and the newly expanded Visitor Experience team has demonstrated exceptional resilience, supporting guests in a variety of ways and leaving a lasting positive impression, even amid challenging circumstances.

Tourism truly is “All Ah We,” and the community’s “Vested Interest” continues to motivate our efforts. However, we cannot do this work alone. We remain deeply grateful to our partners across the tourism ecosystem—from hotel and restaurant staff to tour operators, taxi drivers, vendors, and many others—whose contributions are essential to our success.

In closing, I extend sincere thanks to Governor Bryan, Lieutenant Governor Roach, Commissioner Matarangas-King, our partner agencies, members of the Senate, dedicated volunteers, and my exceptional 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.