COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERANS AFFAIRS AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

10/22/2026-AMENDED AND REPORTED OUT TO THE FLOOR
10/19/2026-REPORTED OUT TO THE COMMITTEE ON RULES AND JUDICIARY

BILL NO. 36-0349

Thirty-Sixth Legislature of the Virgin Islands

September 17, 2026

An act honoring and commending Austin M. Petersen for his extraordinary artistic contributions to the cultural heritage of the Virgin Islands; formally designating the mural wall along Weymouth Rhymer Highway on St. Thomas as Black Utopia Lane; and appropriating funds for the installation of a plaque at Black Utopia Lane

PROPOSED BY: Senator Angel L. Bolques, Jr.
Sponsors: Milton E. Potter, Marvin A. Blyden and Avery L. Lewis
Co-sponsor: Ray Fonseca

WHEREAS, Austin Marvin Petersen was born on June 17, 1960, in St. Thomas, the oldest son of Mabel and Autney Petersen, and is a lifelong son of this territory whose roots run deep in the communities he has served for more than four decades;

WHEREAS, Mr. Petersen was educated in the Virgin Islands public school system, attending Harris Court, Lincoln School (J. Antonio Jarvis Elementary School), Herbert Lockhart Elementary School, Joseph Gomez Elementary School, and Nazareth Bay High School, where he graduated in June 1979;

WHEREAS, he demonstrated from an early age a commitment to community and a love for the arts;

WHEREAS, every day, Mr. Petersen going to and from work passed a wall along Weymouth Rhymer Highway, on Hartman property which borders Caribbean Auto Mart on St. Thomas;

WHEREAS, in 1982, inspired by a vision to beautify, teach, and inform his community about Virgin Islands history and culture, Mr. Petersen began painting the mural on that same wall that would become known as Black Utopia Lane while standing on a shipping crate with a can of black paint and a brush;

WHEREAS, over more than four decades, Mr. Petersen, alongside Kuumba Leba Ola-Niyi, Daniel Gayle, and Marcella "Jaribu-Bobo" Jennings-Collier, has continuously maintained, restored, and expanded the mural, with the voluntary support of friends, family, students, and community members who donate time, money, paint, and encouragement;

WHEREAS, Black Utopia Lane has grown into one of the most recognized and beloved public art installations in the Virgin Islands, reflecting themes of Virgin Islands pride, historical awareness, community empowerment, and positive identity, while drawing the admiration of residents and visitors alike for generations;

WHEREAS, the mural has never benefited from government funding or formal institutional support, surviving solely through the dedication and sacrifice of its creator and his community, a testament to Mr. Petersen's extraordinary commitment to his homeland;

WHEREAS, Mr. Petersen served the territory as an educator for 36 years with the Department of Education, beginning in 1982 as Chief Graphic Artist in the Office of Project Introspection under Mrs. Ruth Moolenaar, and subsequently as a Graphic Arts Teacher at Nazareth Bay High School now the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School in 1985, teaching silk screen printing, offset printing, photography, calligraphy, industrial design, drawing, and

painting, and later at the Addelita Cancryn Junior High School in 2000, and Ulla F. Muller Elementary School in 2013, where he taught basic arts, drawing, lettering, painting, and crafts;

WHEREAS, Mr. Petersen made it possible for students to participate in the painting and maintenance of the mural, earning community service credits toward graduation, thereby weaving the mural into the educational fabric of the territory and inspiring generations of young Virgin Islanders to take pride in their culture and their community;

WHEREAS, Mr. Petersen also created the mural across from the Fire Station in Tutu, further demonstrating his commitment to beautifying and uplifting his community through art;

WHEREAS, Commissioner Cecil George of the Department of Public Works, recognizing even in those early years, the singular vision and dedication Mr. Petersen brought to his work gave Mr. Petersen formal authorization entrusting him with those walls for life;

WHEREAS, Mr. Petersen has received numerous awards and certificates of recognition over the years for his artistic work and community contributions, yet remains one of the most unsung cultural treasures of the Virgin Islands;

WHEREAS, without a formal designation, there is no structural framework to preserve Black Utopia Lane as a cultural asset or to document its significance for future generations, and the 36th Legislature finds it appropriate and long overdue to correct that absence; and

WHEREAS, the people of the Virgin Islands are enriched by the artistic legacy of Austin M. Petersen, and the Legislature desires to honor his contributions, preserve his work, and ensure that the story of Black Utopia Lane endures for generations to come; Now, Therefore,

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Virgin Islands:

SECTION 1. The Legislature of the Virgin Islands, on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands, hereby honors and commends Austin M. Petersen for his extraordinary, decades-long artistic contributions to the cultural heritage of the Virgin Islands, his selfless dedication to the

beautification, education, and cultural preservation of the territory through the creation and maintenance of the Black Utopia Lane mural.

SECTION 2. The Legislature of the Virgin Islands, on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands, extends heartfelt congratulations, admiration, and gratitude to Kuumba Leba Ola-Niyi, Daniel Gayle, Marcella "Jaribu-Bobo" Jennings-Collier for their extraordinary gift to the people and culture of the Virgin Islands.

SECTION 3. The mural wall located on Weymouth Rhymer Highway bordering Caribbean Auto Mart (Hartman Property) on St. Thomas is hereby formally designated as a cultural landmark of the Virgin Islands known as "Black Utopia Lane" which runs the length of the mural wall and shall not alter the official name of Weymouth Rhymer Highway.

SECTION 4. The Department of Public Works, in coordination with the Office of the Governor, shall design, produce, and install an appropriate commemorative plaque on or adjacent to the Black Utopia Lane mural wall. The plaque shall honor Austin M. Petersen, acknowledge his faithful crew and community allies, and describe the historical and cultural significance of Black Utopia Lane to the Virgin Islands.

SECTION 5. The Department of Education, through the Commissioner of Education, shall establish a Public Art Preservation initiative that includes supervised participation by Virgin Islands public high school students in periodic maintenance and preservation activities at Black Utopia Lane. This initiative shall be coordinated with the Department of Public Works and, where practicable, with Austin M. Petersen and his associates. Student participation shall qualify for community service credits toward graduation requirements, continuing the tradition Mr. Petersen himself established during his tenure as an educator.

SECTION 6. (a)The sum of $10,000 is appropriated in the fiscal year ending September 30, 2026 from the General Fund of the Treasury of the Virgin Islands to the Department of

Public Works for the purpose of designing, producing, and installing the commemorative plaque described in section 4 of this act.

(b) The Legislature of the Virgin Islands may appropriate funds to the Virgin Islands Department of Education in an amount not to exceed $10,000 in any fiscal year for the purchase of paint, apinting supplies, tools, and related materials necessary for the maintenance, preservation, and restoration of the Black Utopia Lane mural.

SECTION 7. In recognition and appreciation of his contributions, the President of the Legislature, or the President's designee, shall present perma plaque copy of this act to Austin M. Petersen at an appropriate ceremony.

BILL SUMMARY

This bill honors and commends Austin M. Petersen for his extraordinary, four decades-long artistic contributions to the cultural heritage of the Virgin Islands, and expresses its deepest gratitude and admiration for his selfless dedication to the beautification, education, and cultural preservation of this Territory through the creation and maintenance of the Black Utopia Lane mural. It also designates the mural wall located on Weymouth Rhymer Highway bordering Caribbean Auto Mart (Hartman Property) on St. Thomas as a cultural landmark of the Virgin Islands known as "Black Utopia Lane" which runs the length of the mural wall and shall not alter the official name of Weymouth Rhymer Highway. It further encourages the Department of Education to create a Public Preservation Initiative for the periodic maintenance of Black Utopia Lane. Finally, this bill appropriates $10,000 for a commemorative plaque to be placed at Black Utopia Lane.

BR26-1056/July 14, 2026/LMW/Revised August 12, 2026/LMW/Revised I September 14, 2026/LMW

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