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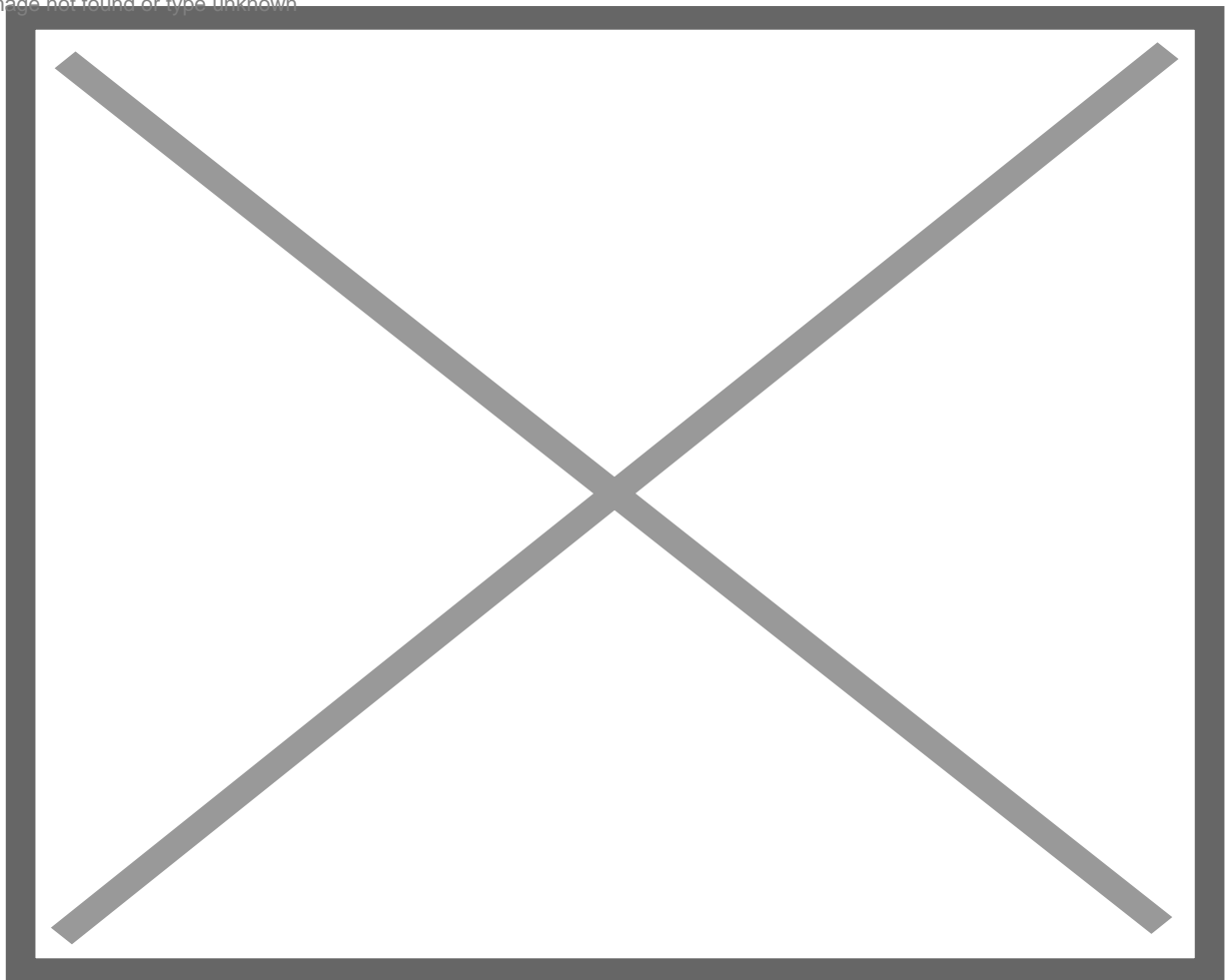
Event Planning at Fort Christian Faces New Oversight by Historical Preservation

Organizers must now navigate approval process for signage at St. Thomas's iconic fort

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Fort Christian in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands.

Organizers of events booked at Fort Christian in St. Thomas must now receive Historical Preservation Committee approval for signage erected on the building. That's according to STT-STJ HPC Chair Akil Petersen, who said that the new process came out of a request from the Division of Libraries, which runs the fort.

During Tuesday's committee meeting, members sat to consider two such applications, the first of what Mr. Petersen expects to be "more and more" as time goes on.

The first application for signage came from Melvin Romney, the organizer behind Fort Fete Virgin Islands. The event, which is in its third year, is timed to begin the St. Thomas Carnival season, Mr. Romney noted.

Signage for the event will be attached to the rails surrounding the building using zip ties or string/rope, so the underlying structure of the fort will not need to be touched, Mr. Romney said.

While at least one member of the committee opined that a large public party was an excellent use of the fort, Sean Krigger, director of the State Historical Preservation Office, had some reservations. With Fort Christian serving as office space for SHPO, Mr. Krigger said he has had the opportunity to become extremely familiar with the historical building. "I have personally identified new cracks that have developed that...weren't there before," he stated, cautioning that noise levels have to be carefully monitored. "This is a very old building and sounds have an impact on the structure."



Making sure to note that he was not drawing a causative line between the cracks and any one particular event that had featured music, Mr. Krigger said he nevertheless felt the need to put his sentiments on the record. "Just be mindful of the sound levels because I don't know...it could be seismic, it could be sound...we just need to be aware of that." Another committee member interjected that the impact of sound on structures was less about total decibel level and more about the amount of bass mixed in.

Mr. Romney said that sound had actually featured in the discussions with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources during planning for the previous two years of Fort Fete, with the parties agreeing on a mutually acceptable volume for music. "We've had a walkthrough prior to receiving the venue and then a walkthrough after to make sure that we're all good," he informed committee members, saying that Rebel Gong Movements, his company, had not received any complaints or notifications about damage to the historical building. Notwithstanding, he addressed

Mr. Krigger's second concern about the movement of some of the larger pieces of equipment by saying that the team has added more "rigor" to their load-in and load-out processes.

Mr. Romney assured committee members that despite the timing, Fort Fete did not feature any paint, powder, glitter, or any of the messier elements of a Carnival party that may negatively impact the building. "We know that we're in a historic district and a historic building/structure," he remarked. "We try to keep the themes cultural," Mr. Romney continued, noting that last year was madras-themed and this year's inspiration is "Hibiscus."

During the wider discussion about using these historic structures to host mass crowd events, committee member Kurt Marsh inquired about how often the buildings are inspected for structural integrity. Upon learning that there were not routinely scheduled inspections, he expressed unease about the prospect of encouraging these large functions.

"I think it's fine and great that people are trying to make opportunities for reclaiming some of these colonial spaces," he remarked, "but these are all non-reinforced structures....A big dance in a large, old, unreinforced structure gives me anxiety, just to be honest." Noting that "the Virgin Islands government does not do a very good job of maintaining historic structures," Mr. Marsh worried about the ramifications of these kinds of events on the very structures the society is attempting to preserve. "I think reclaiming space is important, but we have to really think about and be intentional about how will we reclaim spaces," he said, nevertheless wishing Mr. Romney well with his event.

The committee ultimately approved Mr. Romney's signage application, as they did the second signage application, this one for a dancehall party at the fort on April 26. The promoter of that event, Nia Ward, said that his signage would only consist of the branded tents erected by his sponsor.

Mr. Krigger took the opportunity to advocate for more care and consideration of the uses to which historical structures like Fort Christian are allowed to be put. While acting to support young entrepreneurs like Messrs Romney and Ward, "we...have to be cognizant of sites that are put in our custody," he cautioned.

Noting that the April 26 event features music from a genre that is notoriously bass-heavy, committee member Kevin Rodriguez recommended that the cracks identified by Mr. Krigger be measured by calipers and documented with photographs at regular intervals to monitor whether they are growing larger.