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VI-PR Friendship Day Moves to Agricultural Grounds; Committee Seeks Funding Boost for 60th Anniversary in 2024

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Janeke Simon **October 06, 2023**

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2015 VI-PR Friendship Parade in Christiansted, St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

As the 59th annual Virgin Islands - Puerto Rico Friendship Day approaches, Luis Torres, chair of the VI-PR Friendship Committee, appeared before lawmakers to seek enhanced support for the festival. The event is being celebrated the week of Oct. 1 this year.

Presenting to the Senate Committee on Culture, Youth, Aging, Sports & Parks, Torres stressed the growing financial challenges in organizing the event, especially in anticipation of the significant 60th-anniversary celebration next year. Despite these hurdles, he expressed optimism about the

event's move to the Agricultural Grounds, offering attendees a more expansive venue.

The VI-PR Friendship Committee receives \$50,000 annually for Friendship Day celebrations, but that has not been enough to keep up with rising costs of living. “We’ve had to remove some activities. We had to do certain cutbacks and so forth because things are getting a little bit more expensive. What we could have done with that money years ago, today is a little bit more challenging,” he said.

Not only is the allocation from the government proving insufficient, but private sector support is also dwindling, Mr. Torres disclosed. “Our expenses have increased and the donations from the private sector are becoming less and less as our businesses are struggling to keep afloat,” he told lawmakers. Many of the business entities are hesitant to donate funds this year, preferring to wait instead for the milestone anniversary celebrations in 2024.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Torres noted that various government agencies have provided much-needed in-kind support, including the Department of Tourism, the VI Police Department, and VI Waste Management Authority. Notwithstanding the financial constraints, the Friendship Committee chair promised “an awesome event to the public”. Torres specifically thanked the Department of Agriculture for facilitating the move from the Canegata Ballpark to the Agricultural Grounds, which will provide more space to the public.

Torres asked legislators to consider increasing the allocation from \$50,000 to \$75,000 for next year’s festival. “Next year we will be celebrating our 60-year anniversary and as you know these events are of great importance to our community,” he noted. In 2024, Mr. Torres is hoping to be able to include a fireworks display, a school tour to highlight the historical context of VI-PR Friendship Day, and having more representatives from Puerto Rico on hand to celebrate.

Responding to questions from Senator Marvin Blyden about what fundraising activities the committee is undertaking, Mr. Torres mentioned the traditional arroz con pollo cooking competition, as well as events such as salsa to both entertain and raise funds. Saying that the committee has had to become “very creative” to raise funds, he noted that their go-to activity, a golf tournament, had become very popular with other groups as well. With several tournaments now taking place concurrently, Mr. Torres says their annual fundraiser will now be held early next year “to beat the traffic.”

Senator Samuel Carrion reminded Mr. Torres that the government’s budget for fiscal year 2024 had already been completed, but promised to see what could be done to accommodate the request for an increased allocation.

Correction:

A previous version of this article, because of a text error, included the wrong date of the USVI-PR Friendship 2023 celebrations. The event was celebrated the week of Oct. 1, and ended on Oct. 8, 2023 at the Agricultural Fair Grounds. The article has been updated to reflect the correct information.