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VIPD Promises Heightened Police Presence During Crucian Christmas Festival, President Biden's Stay

VIPD ramps up resources for safe and secure celebrations amidst presidential presence

Culture / **Published On December 13, 2023 06:59 AM /**

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President Biden and his family arrived on St. Croix just after 11:00 p.m. on Tues. Dec. 27, 2022. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Safety is of paramount importance for agencies working collaboratively to execute the Crucian Christmas Festival, slated to run from December 26th, 2023 to January 6th, 2024, according to public officials.

On Tuesday, the V.I. Police Department, Department of Public Works, and Department of Tourism, Division of Festivals, apprised the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public

Safety of ongoing preparatory efforts.

For VIPD Commissioner Ray Martinez, an “all hands on deck” approach will be employed to ensure the festival remains “a jewel in the crown of the United States Virgin Islands.” In fact, Mr. Martinez informed the body that up to \$295,000 in overtime is expected to be paid to police officers as well as all external support officers, excluding the V.I. Port Authority.

Though refraining from disclosing specifics of the policing plan due to its sensitive nature, Mr. Martinez assured lawmakers that their strategies are “comprehensive, innovative and tailored to address the unique challenges of such a large scale and high profile event.”

St. Croix will also host President Joe Biden — [known for spending the New Year holiday on the island with his family](#) — during the season, with the VIPD leading security considerations.

Mr. Martinez promised a “safe and protected” experience for all, noting that the VIPD Mobile Command Station will serve as the onsite communication center for the police. Temporary cameras, drones, digital equipment, enhanced surveillance and foot and vehicular patrols are some of the resources that the VIPD intends to use, the commissioner told lawmakers. In response to a question from Senator Alma Fracis-Heyliger, Mr. Martinez vowed that the enhanced police presence in Frederiksted during the Festival would not compromise crime fighting and prevention in other parts of the island.

The decision to start J'ouvert celebrations during daylight hours – at 6:30 a.m. on January 4 – came from the need to ensure safety, Mr. Martinez told lawmakers. “We just have a generation of revelers who at times can be a lot more disruptive, and as such it just safeguards the community as a whole,” clarified the commissioner. To Senator Angel Bolques’s question about handling any issues arising within the festival grounds, the commissioner said their first line of action is to de-escalate situations as they may arise.

Lawmakers also expressed concern over possible underage drinking. “One thing I hate to see is minors intoxicated in a public environment. It shouldn’t be happening,” said Sen. Javan James. Shamari Haynes, deputy director for the Department of Tourism’s Division of Festivals, noted that the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs would erect the necessary signage at all booths. Mr. Haynes also recommended the use of decoys to ensure vendors are not selling alcohol without the necessary age verification procedures.

Dodson James, deputy commissioner of operations at the Department of Public Works, apprised senators of efforts related to preparing the festival grounds, constructing viewing stands, identifying parking areas, maintaining roadsides in high-traffic areas, and patching roads where possible. Ongoing construction work at the Paul E. Joseph Stadium will be cordoned off from the public to prevent potential injury.

These seasonal activities, he lamented, are a major drain on DPW's ordinary budget. “This is an immense cost that the department incurs for preparing for these events, and it is never budgeted for,” Mr. James noted, emphasizing that several requests for additional funding have been denied.