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Legislative Push for Equal Festival Execution Across Islands Fails in Senate

Senate committee dismisses bill seeking to replace assistant directors with island directors

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Nelcia Charlemagne **March 14, 2024**

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Influencer Kay Love at the 2022-2023 Crucian Christmas Festival. By. KGP/V.I. CONSORTIUM

A bill proposed by Senator Franklin Johnson aiming to bring parity to the execution of festivals across all three islands failed on Wednesday after a motion to bring the measure to a vote received no second in the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

Through Bill 35-0232, staffing in the Division of Festivals would be modified to eliminate the position of assistant director in each island and replace them with directors, bringing the total

number of directors to three. According to Sen. Johnson, the proposed change would have “[removed] redundant layers of bureaucracy” resulting in “a leaner more agile approach to festival management.” The draft legislation would have required each new director to reside on the island that they would ultimately serve, which the lawmaker believed would foster an “understand[ing of] the nuisance of their prospective island,” allowing the new directors to “better tailor festival programs to reflect and celebrate each community’s unique identity.”

In his quest to reform the Division of Festivals, Sen. Johnson received support of former senator Janelle Sarauw who during her tenure in the Legislature had collaborated with former senator Myron Jackson in crafting the original legislation on the subject. Former governor Kenneth Mapp [signed the measure into law](#). However, the implementation of the “noble intentions” of the legislation has “fallen short of our expectations,” she lamented. Those intentions centered on empowering each island to showcase its “unique attributes” and “[synergize] efforts to promote and preserve our cultural legacy.” Ms. Sarauw complained that while carnival and festivals remain “a cornerstone of our cultural calendar, the full spectrum of our cultural diversity remains largely untapped.”

Apart from Sen. Johnson, perceived inequity in the execution of the Crucian Christmas Festival compared to St. Thomas Carnival also vexed fellow Crucian lawmakers Diane Capehart and Marise James, along with testifier Rena Francis, a long-time booth operator. Ms. Francis complained of poor communication and increased booth fees, all while authorities are mulling over whether to shorten the number of Festival days due to rising costs. “Why do booth owners have to communicate with a director of Festivals on the island of St. Thomas, who is not very familiar with our needs,” she asked, making direct reference to Ian Turnbull, who was present in the St. Thomas legislative chamber for Wednesday’s committee meeting.

Ms. Francis shared the view that having a director for each island would “further improve the cultural and festival experience, transparency, equity and accountability.” The draft bill, had it been approved by the Legislature and ultimately signed into law, would have required each director to submit a financial report annually to the chairperson of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance.

The Department of Tourism, who would be directly impacted by such a move, argued against the passage of the bill. Assistant Commissioner Alani Henneman testified that the measure “infringes on the executive branch's ability to manage its operations, staffing and departmental practices,” as the commissioner of Tourism or an appointed designee are the only ones currently authorized to report to the Legislature. Further, she shared that “changing the title of each assistant director per island does not negate the Tourism Department's internal procedures and checks and balances.”

According to Ms. Henneman, festivals on each island previously operated in silos that “lacked a unified base connecting one to another and limited the growth of any individual entity as one metaphorically competed with the next.” The Division of Festivals, formed in 2019, has “grown our territory’s festival events,” and “the current structure of the Division of Festivals is a strong proponent of this success,” she argued.

Despite Sen. Johnson’s concerns over the Crucian Christmas Festival in particular, Ms. Henneman clarified that “we have seen firsthand how the power of the current festival structure has benefited the territory.” However, Sen. Capehart argued that residents of St. Croix including herself felt “disenfranchised with those changes....Let there be fairness and parity. Let St. Croix handle our business,” she exhorted. Similarly, Sen. Marise James feared that having all the assistant commissioners play a role in the planning of all three island’s festivities cannot be “very efficient

and effective.”

In the debate on the issue, Senator Alma Francis Heyliger took an opposing stance, agreeing with Ms. Henneman’s summation that “division in this space is not beneficial for the territory.” According to Sen. Heyliger, “this is starting to sound more like trying to divide St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix again.” The lawmaker declared that she did not “see the need for this,” believing that there are other ways to support each island.

Ms. Capeheart’s motion to bring the bill to a vote in committee failed after none of her colleagues rose to second the effort. Addressing his colleagues after the lack of support torpedoed the draft bill, Mr. Johnson claimed that several invited testifiers in support of the measure did not attend the hearing over fear of retaliation. He maintained that “there’s a lot of injustice happening in the way in which the festival, carnival, and celebration is being run.”

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