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New Festival Bill Sparks Debate Over Saturation and Economic Viability

Lawmakers express concerns over festival saturation and potential financial strain as Sen. Capehart's bill proposing an annual Beer, Wine, and Spirits Festival faces pushback; some suggest merging with existing events to prevent diminishing returns

Entertainment / **Published On October 10, 2024 06:03 AM /**

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Senate Diane Capehart is the author of a bill introducing the U.S. Virgin Islands Beer, Wine, and Spirits Festival. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

After much debate and some hesitation from members of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, lawmakers voted in favor of Bill 35-0257, an act to develop and produce an annual U.S. Virgin Islands Beer, Wine, and Spirits Festival.

“This is a revenue generator. This is for economic stimulation,” said Senator Diane Capehart as she introduced the bill. She said the bill “aims to enhance the Department of Tourism efforts to rejuvenate St. Croix” with a primary goal of showcasing the island. Noting that similar had been done on St. Thomas, Capehart asserted that “St. Croix is more than ready to receive tourists.”

The bill indicates a date of July to host the festival, but Capehart’s comments suggest that there are opportunities for amendment. St. Patrick’s Day and the Agriculture Food Fair were among her suggestions. “Hotel rooms may be a challenge so we can integrate this beer and wine and spirits festival into the Crucian festival activities,” she suggested. In the end, she told her fellow legislators that “the growth of the USVI festival events positively affects the territory’s overall commerce and fund balance of the tourism advertising revolving fund.”

“People go wherever there is a carnival and a festival,” argued Capehart.

However, testimony from Ian Turnbull, director of the Division of Festivals, seemed to suggest otherwise. “From 2021 to present, there has been a continued surge in festival cancellations resulting from low attendance,” he shared. It’s a reality blamed on “the lack of significant financial resources needed for planning, marketing, logistics and operation.”

Turnbull stressed the need for a thorough evaluation to determine if the festival could be held annually without straining the local government’s budget. He proposed exploring a public-private partnership model to bring the event to life. However, aiming to dispel concerns about the festival’s potential, Turnbull noted that “international data reflects a demand for food-centric experiences.”

Nonetheless, he urged prudent decision-making moving forward. “Perhaps we should look at tweaking existing legislation passed for an annual music event and incorporate the promotion of spirits.” That bill, too, was [met with some contention](#) when introduced by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory in December 2023. At the time, she argued that government-hosted festivals are typically revenue generators across the region.

Senator Frett-Gregory was one of several lawmakers who expressed hesitation over Bill 35-0257 and one of two who ultimately voted against the measure. “I strongly feel that what we’re doing is creating some challenges for ourselves as far as how many festivals we’re paying for,” she said. She agreed with Turnbull’s suggestions of merging the Beer, Wine, and Spirits Festival with the Music Festival, which her Frett-Gregory’s bill introduced.

She was also concerned about the timeframe within which the alcohol-centric festival must be held per the legislation - less than one year away. However, Frett-Gregory’s legislation – [Act 8804](#), which established the music festival – specifies that the first iteration of the event should be held no later than December 2025. “There’s a likelihood that we may have to push back the date,” Turnbull told her during Wednesday’s meeting.

Turnbull’s revelation that “research shows some negatives on festivals in general” gave other legislators pause. Senator Novelle Francis Jr. was prompted to support a merger between festivals as well. “I think the merger, or having the greatest impact, is something that we should consider,” he said. Senator Angel Bolques Jr. agreed. “I am a proponent of supporting what would be considered a food and wine, beer spirits festival,” he said, referencing earlier comments on the appeal of food festivals across the globe.

Other legislators, like committee chairperson Senator Javan James, who had also signed on as a sponsor of the music festival, had a word of caution for his colleagues in his final month as a

senator. I'm on my way out. Please, if this passes today, no more festivals.” His concern was one similar to that of Sen. Francis — a fear of over saturation and ultimately, diminishing returns.

Even before Frett-Gregory's bill last year, the territory already hosted three major festivals — the Crucian Christmas Festival, St. Thomas Carnival, and the St. John Celebration — all taking place within months of each other. While these events are the annual carnivals and cultural celebrations of their respective islands, each includes a week of festival or carnival villages featuring music festivals with major international artists. Over the years, performers have included Machel Montano, Shenseea, Koffee, Wyclef Jean, Capleton, Dexta Daps, and many more.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger was less reserved. “I do not support this piece of legislation. I believe it's repetition,” she argued. The lawmaker had also voted against the music festival bill when it was special ordered during the December legislative session. She rubbished the suggestion that this new festival bill would be a revenue generator, and said that merging festivals would be an “injustice”. “Why would I put a festival like this right next to the Crucian Christmas festival, when my goal is to potentially try to fill a period where we're not generating funds,” Senator Francis Heyliger questioned.

Despite Capehart's agreement that a merger with the music festival “makes” sense, her invitations of amendments to change the festival’s date, and her idea of affording the Department of Tourism more flexibility to make decisions on private partnerships and the like, Senators Frett-Gregory and Francis Heyliger remained unmoved. “I will vote on the bill when the necessary amendments are in fact made,” Ms. Frett-Gregory rebutted. Ultimately, the measure was passed with five votes in favor and two opposed.