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## VIPD Commissioner Defends J'Ouvert Date Change: “We Will Always Err on the Side of Safety”

**Commissioner Brooks strongly defended the decision to move J'Ouvert to December 31, citing safety concerns and limited manpower of fewer than 200 officers per district. He said officers already face heavy demands during New Year's Eve gunfire response.**

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**J'Ouvert Morning during the 2018-2019 Carnival Season on St. Croix. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY FOR V.I. CONSORTIUM.**

ST. CROIX — Police Commissioner Mario Brooks on Monday forcefully defended the decision to move J'Ouvert 2025–26 from January 1, 2026 (Old Year's Night/New Year's Day) to Wednesday, December 31, 2025, saying the change was driven by safety concerns, limited

manpower, and the department's duty to protect the public during one of the busiest and most volatile times of the year.

"If people rather party than think about their own safety, then that's a problem," Mr. Brooks told The Consortium during a Monday morning interview. "We're always going to err on the side of safety—always."

The commissioner's remarks follow [a Consortium report](#) confirming that the V.I. Police Department pushed for the schedule change despite resistance from the Division of Festivals, which had spent months finalizing the festival timetable. The shift, announced Monday, moves J'Ouvert to December 31—the same day as the Food Fair and the arrival of two cruise ships—after VIPD warned that holding it on January 1 posed unmanageable security risks.

Mr. Brooks dismissed criticism of the department's position, calling the decision both practical and necessary. "Everyone knows what happens in the territory on the 21st of December. Even a five-year-old walking on the street knows what happens," he said, referring to the period of heightened gunfire that typically accompanies Old Year's Night/New Year's celebrations. "We've been fighting this for umpteen years. Every day, after we come back from walking on patrol, we're doing press releases with you on eight, nine, ten, fourteen, fifteen guns that we take off the streets. They're not lying there—that's because we're out there all night dealing with gunfire suppression."

He continued: "So why is that even a topic? We should always err on the side of safety first."

The commissioner noted that the department's goal is to prevent tragedy before it happens. "Would you like to have anybody go on the road, and then next thing you know, when people fall down because they're getting hit from rounds, the first thing they'll say is the police didn't know what they were supposed to do," he said. "We preempt these things by ensuring that we put measures in place so we can go to the festival and come back safely."

According to Commissioner Brooks, staffing limitations played a major role in VIPD's request for the change. "When you have a force of active sworn personnel of less than 200 per district, we have to look at and balance the needs and wants of the community," he said. "That's quite difficult, but we're making it work by the grace of God."

He explained that the department must maintain sufficient officers for routine calls for service while also covering major events such as the three carnival and festival celebrations, agriculture fairs, and numerous nonprofit and community gatherings. "All of those events fall squarely in the lap of the VIPD—every last one of them," he said.

The commissioner further elaborated that the department's manpower challenges are not unique to the Virgin Islands but reflect a broader national trend. "You could have a discussion with any police department nationwide, and they will never tell you that they have the adequate amount of manpower," he said. "The art of policing is not glamorous anymore. People are not running to be police officers like before. There are more lucrative opportunities now, whether it's opening their own business, getting into digital currency trading, or other ventures."

Mr. Brooks noted that VIPD is actively working to strengthen recruitment and retention. "We're trying to get another class in session real soon," he said. "The goal is always to bring in more officers than we lose. Every year we lose people to retirement or relocation to the mainland, but we also put in classes to replace them."

He highlighted the department's cadet program as one way to attract younger recruits. "We did very well on St. Croix and just started it on St. Thomas," he said. "Year before last, we got 10, and out of the 10, three transitioned over to CSOs (community service officers), and we anticipate them transitioning to police officers as well."

The commissioner explained that VIPD routinely shifts resources between islands to meet the demands of major cultural events. "When we have carnival on St. Thomas, we bring over officers from St. Croix. When we have festival on St. Croix, we bring over officers from St. Thomas," he said. "We're one department."

On the specific issue of J'Ouvert, Mr. Brooks said the department faced an impossible situation if the event remained on New Year's Day. "You're looking at almost 10,000 people on the road that morning," he said. "That's where our major concern is, because you're doing that the night when my officers, myself included—we're on the streets all night doing firearms and gunfire suppression. Then to turn around now and take these very same officers to put them on the road for the next five or six hours to deal with 10,000 people? Where does that make sense?"

The commissioner insisted that the department's first and only concern is the safety of the public. "Whatever we need to do to make those adjustments, to get the prerequisite amount of bodies on the ground to support the events, we're going to do that," he said.

He added that the department's work often goes unnoticed. "Everyone is quick to talk about when things happen, but we don't talk about when things don't happen," he said. "When things don't happen, it's because we're where we're supposed to be."

Mr. Brooks concluded by reaffirming his department's position that safety remains the top priority during the Crucian Christmas Festival.