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## Carnival Pageant Participation Uneven as Youth Divisions Lag and Four Enter Ambassadorial Queen Race

With the February 20 registration deadline approaching, officials report one contestant each for Princess and Junior Miss, while four women compete in the Ambassadorial Carnival Queen Pageant.

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The four 2026 St. Thomas Ambassadorial Carnival Queen contestants pose together. From left: Safiah Wharton (#1), D'quana Lewis (#2), Ajeune Willett-Tyson (#3), and Jahniya Williams (#4). By. USVI FESTIVALS.

With fewer than 10 days remaining before the pageant registration deadline for the 2026 St. Thomas Carnival, lawmakers and festival officials are confronting low participation in the

younger divisions even as interest in the Ambassadorial Carnival Queen Pageant exceeds recent years.

The issue surfaced Tuesday when the Division of Festivals appeared before the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection. Committee chair Senator Avery Lewis asked how many contestants would be competing for this year's St. Thomas crowns.

"We have one contestant for Princess and one for Junior Miss," responded Ian Turnbull, director of the Division of Festivals. Unless additional hopefuls register before the February 20 deadline, those titles will be awarded through coronation rather than competition.

At the same time, the Division of Festivals has confirmed that there are four contestants in the St. Thomas Ambassadorial Carnival Queen Pageant — more than participated in St. Thomas last year and more than the two who competed on St. Croix. The Ambassadorial contestants are Safiah Wharton #1, D'quana Lewis #2, Ajeune Willett-Tyson #3, and Jahniya Williams #4.

"This situation with contestants is an ebb and flow," Mr. Turnbull told lawmakers, recalling a "similar situation" during the recently concluded Crucian Christmas Festival. In that instance, only one contestant initially registered for the Miss St. Croix title before a second contestant later entered, allowing two women to compete.

"We put in the work. We put out some more promotions. Went on radio," Mr. Turnbull said, explaining how the Division ultimately secured another contestant. He indicated that similar outreach efforts may be needed in St. Thomas, though he said the Division remains hopeful.

"February 20 is the deadline. If you have kids, we are going to give you support, money, for anyone that wants to join," Mr. Turnbull announced.

"We were able to do it in St. Croix. My fingers crossed, we will be able to do it again here in St. Thomas," he told Senator Lewis.

Senator Lewis suggested that increasing participation in the younger divisions may require more than additional marketing. "Who took it out of the schools? Put it back," he said. "Let the schools them have the in-house competitions, and then the winners from them come out and be in our product," he suggested, noting that such an arrangement existed during his time in school.

Although Mr. Turnbull explained that the Division reaches out to schools, Senator Lewis pressed for stronger engagement. "Offer them a change, some kind of incentive, some bonus...start within the schools," he said.

Lewis also pointed to the cost of participation, describing it as "exorbitant." He suggested that dresses can cost thousands of dollars. "Nobody want to participate," he lamented.

Senator Carla Joseph supported the call to establish a pageant pipeline within the schools and said there appears to be a "financial barrier" that did not exist in prior years. She recalled that some contestants were privately sponsored in the past.

Mr. Turnbull told lawmakers that the Department of Tourism has reached out to hotels to gauge their interest in sponsoring contestants. "With the numbers that hotels are receiving, to me, it should be easy for them to do it," he said.

Senator Joseph questioned that approach. “If they sponsor a contestant for a government-run program, I don't see how they're going to get the benefit,” she replied.

Senator Lewis encouraged the Division to widen its sponsorship outreach. “We have some large corporate sponsors here. We could engage them. Nothing wrong with having a Miss Banco Popular. Nothing wrong with having Miss Oriental, [or] Miss Plaza East,” he said.

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