

The Virgin Islands Consortium

New Day For Territory's Festivals And Carnival Becomes Clearer As Dept. Of Tourism Details Plan

Carnival / **Published On July 19, 2019 11:12 AM /**

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Beginning with the Crucian Christmas Festival this year, the territory's festivals and carnivals will be under the umbrella of the Department of Tourism. During D.O.T.'s budget hearing on Thursday, Commissioner Joseph Boschulte provided important details relative to execution of the new strategy, and why the department sees great opportunity to dramatically improve the carnival/festival product from its current state, and more importantly as carnivals have grown to become a major tourism driver not only in the Caribbean, but in states across the U.S.

Before the Division of Festivals bill was signed into law by former Governor Kenneth Mapp, carnival operated under private committees and funded by the Government of the

Virgin Islands. But the relationship between the committees and the government grew fraught as these committees -- most glaringly the St. Thomas Carnival Committee -- refused to furnish financial details to senators. In fact, certain key committee members [had to be subpoenaed](#) to attend hearings -- even as the government continued to fund their operations with millions of dollars.

Out of this frustration, and eyeing a growth opportunity, the Division of Festivals bill was introduced by Senators Myron Jackson and Janelle Sarauw. [Its approval](#) this year by Mr. Mapp was well received by the community.

While the new division's responsibilities are currently being performed by D.O.T. employees, once fully in place, it will be staffed with 12-14 individuals territory-wide, and will cost \$1.1 million annually, which includes salaries and fringe benefits.

Senator Athneil Thomas railed against the cost, stating, "It's horrible compared to last year when you had zero was the cost for staffing it, and now we've gone to \$1.1 million? Good gracious."

He added, "I don't care how you break it down, I don't care what professionals you have, you just doubled that budget right there and the volunteers that did it for the past 800 years were asking for an increase in budget and we failed to give them the money to put on a better production, so we hand it to the government to sink the government \$1.1 million in a hole. That's what that's about."

Mr. Athneil, however, who up to 2018 served as vice chairman of the VI Carnival Committee (St. Thomas Carnival Committee), was part of the problem as to why the Division of Festivals was created. The committee, time after time, failed to provide detailed information as to how the money was being spent. And past years, the organization of carnival/festival has been aslant at best. For instance, people who attend such events -- and there are many -- rely on early planning, as most have jobs and must work around their schedules. But it's nearly impossible to plan on attending the territory's carnival and festivals as the schedules of said events have not been released timely. In fact, a number of individuals The Consortium spoke to did not see the St. John Festival schedule that included performing artists until a week before the event.

Asked by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory how will the Division of Festivals under D.O.T. improve the festivals and carnival, Mr. Boschulte was succinct.

"I think it provides a great opportunity for the tourism product on a whole for the territory because the people that we see coming to the events, we see them being people that we don't necessarily target in our promotions right now. So we see it being our diaspora that don't live in the territory. We see the eastern Caribbean as a base that we have a lot of people that live amongst us here in the territory that have people that would come if we market properly -- give them enough time to know who's coming to these respective events that they can come. It would help us in regard to increasing our airlift in the Eastern Caribbean that's waned away over the past years, because we have to have the attraction and the demand, then the airlines come."

Mr. Boschulte also spoke of how competitive the business of carnival has become, with Caribbean islands no longer only competing against themselves to attract visitors, but

U.S. mainland states, whose leaders have seen the value of carnival.

"Every [major] city in the U.S. now has carnivals, so we now are competing against all of them and we need to be in front," he said. "It's very competitive and if we don't have our messaging... if we announce very late the attractions... it's difficult for people to plan and come if they're only finding out four weeks in advance."

Mr. Boschulte went on: "I think under the Department of Tourism umbrella, we have an opportunity to use each one of these festivals as a launch for the next one, and the next one, because everything is in sync under one entity as opposed to three separate factions working with the same goal to be successful with events."

Under the new setup, the funds that were provided to the private committees for the events on St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John -- roughly \$1.5 million -- will be solely used for promotions and organizing activities. There's also immense potential to collect additional dollars from private sponsorship. Mr. Boschulte also made known that the Division of Festivals will have three key functions: a marketing arm to promote; an operations arm responsible for putting on the events; and the third, "a back office to make sure the monies are properly appropriated and spent, and a check and balance that's happening."

The Department of Tourism was at the Senate to discuss its fiscal year 2020 budget in the Committee on Finance. D.O.T. is seeking \$31,857,622, which includes funding from the general fund of \$3,472,622, and the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund of \$28,385,000.