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\$39,000 Stolen From Agricultural Food Fair Funds Following Full Day of Vendor Payments; Positive Nelson Says Incident Possible Inside Job

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Ernice Gilbert **February 03, 2020**

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Agricultural Fair 2019 By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — The annual Agricultural Food Fair on St. Croix, known as the largest agricultural fair in the Caribbean and one of St. Croix's most patronized events, took a major hit sometime between last Monday night and Tuesday morning (Jan. 27-28), when a building on the Dept. of Agriculture complex in Estate Lower Love — the same location where Agrifest is held annually — was broken into and a safe with \$39,000 stolen.

The Consortium was made aware of the incident by a reliable police source.

According to Dept. of Agriculture Commissioner, Positive Nelson, who spoke to the Consortium on Sunday evening about the incident as well as the upcoming 2020 Agricultural Fair, just over \$12,000 in cash was collected from vendors who were making last-minute payments before the February 15-17 event. Another \$25,000 from the Dept. of Tourism was provided through a check, along with two other checks which brought the amount in checks to \$27,000, the commissioner said. This means most of the funds will be recovered, as the thieves will not be able to cash the checks.

But the more than \$12,000 in lost funds is a major hit to the Agricultural Food Fair Board and the Dept. of Agriculture, two organizations working tirelessly to prepare for the highly anticipated event.

"They stole the entire safe," Mr. Nelson lamented. "There were also some documents in there, some deeds in there for some land that we had acquired."

Mr. Nelson, the former veteran senator who became Dept. of Agriculture commissioner under the Bryan Administration and has been lauded for his efforts, described the burglary as harmful and said he believed that the break-in was an inside job.

"Unfortunately I believe that somewhere along the line that it was an inside job," he said. "It's unfortunate because we don't usually keep that kind of money [at the Dept. of Agriculture]. We had actually collected a good bit of the money in the day but we didn't get to deposit it. We talked about depositing it but the day got busy so they were going to do it first thing in the morning and somebody might have heard that conversation, or something or the other. Something happened there; I can't blame everybody but I don't think it was a total stranger who did this."

Mr. Nelson said the funds were collected all day Monday from vendors who were making payments to ascertain that their booth spaces were secured. He said an employee of the department, a former assistant commissioner, Errol Chichester, was the first to see windows of the building where the safe was held broken Tuesday morning.

The former senator called on anyone willing to help the Agricultural Food Fair Board — the organization he said is paying for a lot of the work ongoing at the fair grounds and whose account the funds were supposed to be deposited into — to please do so as the monies are needed now more than ever.

"We need all the monies that we can get. I'm hopeful that we have some private sponsors — and I want to put it out there — if there's any philanthropic person in the territory, somebody who wants to donate to the Agricultural Fair Board, they can just make checks out to the Agricultural Food Fair Board of the Virgin Islands and drop it by the department. Any missing money is going to strain our efforts. A lot of work is going into getting prepared," Mr. Nelson said.

Mr. Nelson said the incident pained him because, he stressed, he believed it was someone who knew of the funds who might have stolen the safe.

"It's a hit, it's unfortunate and it hurts especially feeling that it was someone close," he said.

This year's fair will be the 49th annual, taking place on Feb. 15-17 in Estate Lower Love at the Rudolph Shulterbrandt Agricultural Complex.

Correction: Feb. 3, 2020

A previous version of this story said a current Dept. of Agriculture assistant commissioner was the first to see that the safe had been stolen. Mr. Nelson told the Consortium moments in a followup call that he actually said it's former Dept. of Agriculture assistant commissioner Errol Chichester who first saw the break-in. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.

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