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Tourism defends Festivals Division plan, budget request

By ELLIOTT DAVIS Daily News Staff 3 hrs ago



Joseph Boschulte

V.I. Tourism Department officials defended their proposed fiscal year 2020 budget before the Senate Finance Committee on Thursday on St. Croix, with many questions from senators concerning the planned Division of Festivals and the money earmarked for it.

V.I. Tourism Commissioner Joseph Boschulte and other officials detailed the department's proposed budget of \$31,857,622 for next year, which includes \$1.1 million for staffing the new Festivals Division.

The division was established by Bill 32-0308 — sponsored by Sen. Janelle Sarauw and signed into law by former Gov. Kenneth Mapp — and will organize and execute festivals and reestablish the Virgin Islands Cultural Heritage Institute.

The law mandates that the Tourism commissioner appoint a Festivals Division director and three assistant directors — one each for St. Croix, St. John and St. Thomas. But the department's proposed budget includes 12 additional positions for the new division.

Sen. Athneil Bobby Thomas was fiery in his questioning of department officials, asking how they could “give me a good feeling and disappoint me in the same testimony.”

Thomas was concerned about the money allocated for staffing the division “sinking the government with \$1 million in the hole.”

“It's horrible ... when the cost last year for staffing it is zero,” Thomas said, referring to the previous model of a volunteer-based Carnival committees.

Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory asked Boschulte how his team came up with the structure for the division, which includes four accounting positions and an administrative specialist.

Boschulte said his team wanted to treat the division “as a business,” noting its three separate areas of operations, marketing and accounting. Boschulte added that marketing carnivals and festivals in the Caribbean is “very competitive” and it is important to have a “new set of eyes taking a look” at the territory's product.

The commissioner also said that it will be important to have a staff that focuses on marketing and operations, lessening the need for full-time volunteers.

Finance Committee Chairman Kurt Vialet also questioned Boschulte about the staffing, focusing on the need for four accounting positions. Boschulte countered that he was aware of the previous concerns regarding the

“accountability of monies being spent” in the previous volunteer-based structure. He added that he sees the new structure as an opportunity to grow the territory’s three Carnival festivals.

Sarauw blasted the Tourism Department last month for being slow in establishing the division.

“We have an opportunity to promote our culture, rebrand and market our Carnival and Festivals to bring revenue to the territory,” Sarauw said in a written statement. “Case in point, our neighboring British Virgin Islands brought thousands to the Buju Long Walk to Freedom concert. If we market and brand our activities, we can entice people to come and invest in our territory. It’s called entertainment tourism. Instead, this administration is nonchalant in implementing the law.”

Boschulte responded by pointing out that the division is an “unfunded mandate” until the 2020 budget is approved.

“While we work with the Office of Management and Budget to secure funding for the Division of Festivals and the Virgin Islands Cultural Heritage Institute within the Department of Tourism, we are exploring every way we can to let travelers know about the outstanding cultural offerings of our islands,” Boschulte said.

In addition to the Festivals Division discussion, Boschulte described his team’s marketing strategy as the department “continues on the path to hurricane recovery” and works to recapture the “No. 1 position as the premier Caribbean destination.”

Boschulte said that with the territory still low on available hotel rooms after the 2017 hurricanes, his team is focusing on digital marketing to specific regions, which he said provides a “much stronger bang for the buck.”

He said that a digital strategy also allows for more targeting, reach and measurability. Boschulte added that his team is developing a marketing plan to establish St. Croix as its own brand, and also solidify the identities of St. John and St. Thomas.

The commissioner also pointed out some positives for the department, such as adding new flights from places like Houston and Chicago and getting cruise passenger arrivals back in line with pre-hurricane numbers. He also said that Airbnb has played a big role in making up for the lack of available hotel rooms, with 830 listings on St. Thomas alone as well as hundreds of listings between St. Croix and St. John.

Sen. Javan James also provided some praise for the Tourism Department officials, singling out the recent International Boxing Hall of Fame induction ceremony for boxing legend Julian Jackson in Canastota, N.Y.

James noted that he saw the USVI logo everywhere at the ceremony, and urged the testifiers to “continue to do those things ... promote our Virgin Islands heroes.”

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