

## Vieques Denied Equal Access

Through both benign neglect and intentional discrimination, the governments of the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico have denied the people of Vieques access to competitive commercial markets, health care, education, and government services. The mechanism by which they deliberately prevent such access is through the ferry system of the ATM. Specifically, they constrain the logistics through severely minimizing the cargo ferry services allowed to Vieques.

Notwithstanding the deplorable maintenance and operational record of the ATM, (for numerous months of this past year they have not been able to keep operational even 10% of their fleet serving Vieques and Culebra) their historical performance shows intentional denial of cargo ferry service to Vieques.

How can a transportation company consistently fail so dramatically and so completely and not be fired or replaced? Follow the money:

1. The ATM organization is a political entity, not a business. The politically appointed managers have had no proper training and experience. Their stated mission is to organize, train, and equip the ATM to operate a ferry service for the benefit of the Clients, us. However, they are incapable and not competent.
2. The government people who run the system don't use the system, don't care about their Client, don't report to us, aren't held accountable to us, and they don't fear any repercussions from our protests or complaints.
3. The entire system is held hostage to the organization's self-centered interests. We, the Clients, are here for the benefit of the government run ATM, instead of the other way around. Schedules, equipment, facilities, work rules, and routes are designed for the convenience and financial rewards of crews and staff, not in the interest of the Clients to be served.
4. With an annual budget of over \$25 million, half goes to the employees. Given the totally inappropriate purchases of boats, one can't help but wonder how much more money works its way back into the pockets of management?
5. Not wanting any competition, efforts to operate a private cargo ferry system from Mosquito pier several years ago were thwarted by the ATM.
6. The system is corrupted, many of the personnel are incompetent, and the operation (including maintenance) is deplorable. Federal investigations are ongoing, and through it all, people are actually paid to keep operating in this mode year after year. Neither Puerto Rico nor the US care about our rights enough to fix the system.

Our road to suppliers, medical services, schools, government offices, and the rest of the world currently passes through miles of ocean. This road is barely accessible, and we are totally dependent on the ATM. **The entire ferry system**

**(ATM) is now, and has been, so totally mismanaged that it has almost single-handedly crushed the economy of Vieques and is dashing the hopes for our future.** Our constitutional rights of equal access have been denied. The governments that have been charged with protecting our interests and providing our access have totally failed us.

Discrimination against Vieques through political and economical favoritism toward Culebra has led to the systematic deprivation of services for us to the benefit of Culebra:

Vieques has a permanent population of about 9,200 people plus part time residents and tourists. We are allocated only 15 cargo ferries per week to supply all of the island's needs. In comparison, Culebra with a population of approximately 1,800 plus tourists is allocated 12. ***The math reveals the obvious intent of the authority to hold us down and suppress any possibility of prosperity. If the ATM limits the total round trips to 27 per week, the fair mix of ferries would be 21 for Vieques and 6 for Culebra.***

To add even more insult to our injury, there is substantial evidence that local business interests exercise a high degree of influence over who gets access to the island. In the *PR Daily Sun*, February 6, 2011 issue, our senator, Lorna Soto, is quoted as saying: "There are sectors inside Vieques that control the economy...." We are forced to deal with family monopolies in most all of our necessity purchases in Vieques:

1. Grocery stores
2. Gasoline
3. Pharmacy
4. Building materials
5. Auto inspection
6. Bank

Government supported monopolies include:

1. Electricity
2. Water
3. Telephone
4. Ferry

According to *Caribbean Business*, 62% of Puerto Rican household expenses go to food, utilities, and fuel. In Vieques, almost all of our necessary expenses are paid to monopolies of one sort or another. We experience little of a "free market" society. Competition in retail is systematically prevented through the limitation of availability of reservations and space on the cargo ferry on a consistent basis.

Although the FTA (Federal Transportation Administration), who has provided much funding to the ATM, is aware of some of the discrimination and dysfunction of the system here, it continues. Further economic discrimination is a result of

the Jones Act which restricts ferry boat operations between US ports to ships built in the US. This historical act of corporate welfare has created the same form of dependency all welfare does, and we have a shipbuilding industry in the US that can't even remotely compete in a global market. The disastrous effect on Vieques is that we can't get the type of ferries we need (combination passenger and drive-through for auto and truck) because nobody in the States currently builds them and the existing ones are seldom sold. Throughout the rest of the world they are available used at a small fraction of what it would cost to have a custom built one. In this case, large shipbuilding corporations are intended to benefit at the expense of small islands of people who live near the poverty level. This is intentional discrimination by the government to pick winners and losers.

All told, the discrimination and denial of equal access is blatant, but ignored. Our governments are totally paternal and think that they know how we should live. They have no problem imposing their visions onto us. These same governments are responsible for correcting the situation. Governmental inaction on behalf of our basic rights is indefensible.

More ferry articles and letters: <http://viequesverde.biz/commentary.htm>

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