

End the Embargo of Vieques Now!

I don't know when it started, but for the last seven years that I have been in Vieques, the island has been suffering from a government enforced embargo. The shipment of goods and vehicles between Vieques and Isla Grande has been intentionally constricted resulting in only a fraction of the natural cargo flow that an economically viable community needs.

Vieques has a permanent population of about 10,000 people plus part time residents and tourists. We are allocated only 15 cargo ferries per week to supply all of the island's needs for food, propane, retail merchandise, construction materials, vehicle transport, etc. To some, that might seem adequate, but to place these figures into perspective, Culebra has a population of approximately 1,000 plus tourists and is allocated 12 cargo ferries per week. Based upon population figures, Vieques is scheduled for only 12.5% the service provided Culebra. Vieques has ten times the population and only 3 additional cargo ferries per week!

As any user of the cargo or passenger ferries will note, the Culebra cargo ferries are generally full, so the problem is not that Culebra has too many ferries. The problem is that Vieques is totally underserved. Using the same ratio of ferry trips to the population of Culebra, we should have 120 trips per week for Vieques!

How can any sane administrator think that 12 ferries for 1,000 people balances with 15 for 10,000? Possibilities include:

- A. Administrative incompetence. I'm hopeful that even our system of patronage doesn't place such mentally challenged individuals into such high positions of authority, but I believe that even a fourth grader in our school system can figure out the math. Math is not likely the cause.
- B. Politics. This problem has continued through multiple administrations and party dominance. This is not normal politics.
- C. Personal grudges. Too long lasting and the characters have changed.
- D. Prejudice against Vieques. Maybe at some levels, but....
- E. The Navy. Get real.
- F. Budget limits. Certainly the budgets are limited, but that doesn't in any way explain how the existing budget is allocated.
- G. Lobbying by existing merchants. The constraint of transport gives huge advantage to existing merchants with permanent bookings on the ferries making it impossible for new businesses to secure the slots necessary to supply their emerging competing businesses. Hmmm!
- H. All of the above or other?

To address the limitations of space on the government ferries, a private ferry began service several years ago. It's schedule was set solely to accommodate it's fuel trucks and construction vehicles without viable roundtrips in a single day.

But still, since one cannot make a vehicle reservation for less than 6 weeks in advance on the government system, it was utilized by those of us needing transport, although it charged over twice as much as the government run system. It operated out of the deep water at Mosquito Pier, but was denied access to that pier about eighteen months ago and required to use the government's regular ferry pier. But, because the draft of the ship is greater than the depth of the water except at high tide, no regular forecasted schedule can be established. Additionally, the government ferries take priority and don't commit an access time to the private ferry until the last minute. This service is not viable for merchants.

Like most government "services" the ferry system is a monopoly and totally unresponsive to the customer. Any breathing person can see the numbers and understand that Vieques is suffering from a government enforced embargo. Demands for a bridge by some residents reflect the recognized needs for reasonable access to and from the island. The ferry system could be improved at far less cost than a bridge. Properly run, the system could actually make money, though it's justification as a government "service" is that it is supposedly providing transport for its citizens like the road systems throughout Isla Grande.

As a simple and immediate solution, additional boats like the Cayo Largo that carry both passengers and cargo could replace the horrible passenger-only boats (cold on the inside and stinky on the outside) effectively doubling or tripling the cargo/vehicle service. The short route (Mosquito Pier to Ceiba) would allow a rapid turnaround of the cargo fleet enabling several more trips per day with the same crews and fuel usage. Where there is a will, there is a way. But, what's the way? How do we get the government to lift the embargo?