

Stop Abusing Vieques Citizens – End the Embargo!

Your August 3rd article announcing the Green Triangle shows belated awareness by Governor Fortuño of the critical need for generating more green business opportunities in Vieques. Unfortunately, without resolve and attention to the details, Vieques will continue on a downward economic spiral. Although the solutions are inexpensive and obvious, nobody in government is willing to lift a finger. The core problem for Vieques is lack of access.

For an island like ours, access means rapid, regular, inexpensive transportation. We need to import all of the goods and many of the services required to live and run businesses from the main island. And, given that our only industry is tourism, we need to provide an easy and inexpensive means for our customers to reach our venue. Our current transportation system to Vieques is in absolute ruins and cannot not even begin to support our needs.

The ferry system run by the Autoridad de Transportación Marítimo (ATM) has been painfully inadequate and poorly run for decades, but has become dramatically worse today. The issues of quality of service, treatment of passengers, regularity of schedules, and appropriateness of facilities and equipment are extremely important. Government's total disregard shows a deplorable lack of respect toward the human beings living in and visiting our island. Notwithstanding the above insults to us, the allotment of cargo ferry service to Vieques is choking us and making everyday life logistically strained, not to mention the impossibility of any kind of growth. Sustainable Development is Dead in the Water!

The fact that the cargo services to Vieques are a fraction of what is needed is incontestable: 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. In comparison, Culebra with a population of approximately 2,000 plus tourists is allocated 12. The math reveals the obvious intent of the authority to punish Vieques, with the approval of the PR government.

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 population, Vieques should have 60 trips per week! The Vieques II passenger ferry was taken out of service several months ago, and the ATM was running cargo ferries in its place. This effectively doubled cargo capacity for us. Despite no announcements and indefinite scheduling, the cargo ferries filled up to instantly absorb the extra space. This incident made a dramatic positive improvement on our abilities to do business with the main island and to economically visit government and medical offices. After a month of this improvement, the system reverted to business as usual. For the last several weeks, "normal" service has degenerated into "crisis" service as almost

all of the ferries are broken. Soon we will need the “Berlin Airlift” to keep us supplied.

We have one of the highest unemployment levels in Puerto Rico. We cannot create jobs for our residents or start and run businesses without adequate cargo service. We have lost existing jobs because the ferry system did not offer the capacity to export containers of materials under federal contract. Growth of existing businesses is constrained, and starting new businesses that require the regular delivery of products and/or materials is generally impossible under our allocation of ferries.

Vieques is treated like the bastard stepchild, or as my friends and neighbors say: “the tail of the dog”. It truly hurts to see our citizens discriminated against and abused by our own government.

Our road to government offices passes through 20 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.

As our government and medical services are cut back on Vieques and moved to big island locations, we cannot afford to rent cars every week to make repeated visits to offices and clinics. Many locals without credit cards and students currently cope with very lengthy and circuitous routes of public transportation. A simple visit to a doctor or government office burns a day of work.

Household goods, food, fuel, building materials, services, etc. are only available here in limited quantities and with limited selection. Control of transportation allows monopolies to rule. Vieques suffers from higher prices, reduced customer service, and inadequate product availability. Without competition there is no advertising. Without advertising, there is no newspaper. Without a newspaper, we are kept in the dark: - divided and conquered.

Shopping (business or personal) for products that are not available in Vieques or are grossly over-priced requires access to the ferry for our cars. Is it reasonable that round trip reservations must be made **months** in advance?

The core cause of the issues outlined above is INADEQUATE CARGO FERRY SERVICE!

Government’s role is to provide adequate transportation infrastructure to foster commerce and public access to services. The entire road and highway system of Puerto Rico is provided for these same purposes. The road is not a profit center; it is not a business; and it does not make money. The ferry service required to sustain our island falls into this same category. We’ve been told that

federal subsidies (\$5,000,000/yr from one source or \$29 per passenger from another) sustain the ferry operations. Additional grants are claimed to pay for infrastructure and equipment. If this is remotely true, there is NO EXCUSE for money issues to be the cause of our dismal service. If government can't do the job, they should quit! Give the federal subsidy to private companies who **bid** the routes instead of using ***control of the ports to prevent private companies from entering the market.***

This is primarily a top management fiasco causing a systemic collapse and failure. It begs for immediate assistance. We are in a period of dire fiscal constraints, but ***this issue is a catastrophe for our community and deserves both priority attention and action.***

All can see the numbers (15 ferries per week for 10,000 people versus 12 per week for Culebra with 2,000 people) and understand that Vieques is suffering from an embargo. Attempts to run a private ferry are met with opposition from the ATM who rules the ports! Demands for a bridge by some residents reflect the recognized needs for reasonable access to and from the island. An improved ferry system is one answer at a fraction of the cost.