

July 15, 2010

Honorable Pedro R. Pierluisi,
Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico

Dear Commissioner Pierluisi,

Thank you so much for your tireless efforts on behalf of Puerto Rico, and most specifically, Vieques. You remind me of the Energizer Bunny!

I read with delight your July 9, 2010 "Green Plan for Vieques." Your thoughts are very much on target, and most of the residents here agree totally. The former planning document created by Estudios Técnicos (*Plan Maestro para el Desarrollo Sustentable de Vieques*) was very well done with the consensus of the community, and is consistent with your statement. The major factor that has prevented us from realizing even a modicum of success in this endeavor is the **Embargo of Vieques**. We are continually and repeatedly denied access to the main island. **Something is terribly wrong with the relationship between Vieques and the Commonwealth.**

I have been visiting Vieques since 1973. I love this island and love living in Puerto Rico. Since becoming a full time resident over five years ago, I have finally come to realize that 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. Now, I'm not overly concerned about the ordinary people who think us unsophisticated or "hillbilly" types, if they want to act that way toward us.... I'm upset about the way we are treated by our own government.

Naturally, life on a small island comes with limitations and inconveniences associated with the difficult logistics of transporting people and cargo back and forth. While the isolation can be a hassle, it also contributes to the quality of life one enjoys away from the hustle and bustle of more main stream communities. As our Commonwealth becomes more and more socialistic (not necessarily a good thing, but a fact), our citizens develop greater dependence on government to provide services and opportunities. Progress had been made to offer some of these services in Vieques, but under the current economic situation, cutbacks have caused the closing of local offices and many, many government offerings and demands require visiting offices located throughout Isla Grande.

Our road to government offices passes through 20 miles of ocean. This road is barely accessible, and we are totally dependent on the Autoridad de Transporte Marítimo. 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. This is the opposite of the intent of the many programs that have implemented to turn around the economy.

There is almost total consensus that the future of Vieques is fundamentally rooted in tourism (we have absolutely nothing else), and to that end, we need to develop our island's infrastructure and amenities in a sustainable manner. We want to improve our quality of life without losing our way of life or damaging our natural resources. Unfortunately, the current cargo ferry system makes this utterly impossible. ***Under the long-term, government enforced embargo, the shipment of goods and vehicles between Vieques and Isla Grande has been so constrained that our community is not economically viable.*** The extreme restriction of cargo services denies us the ability to live normal lives, start and run businesses, and grow the community as we see fit.

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 ATM.

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! Since the Vieques II passenger ferry was taken out of service several months ago, the ATM has been running cargo ferries in its place. This has effectively doubled cargo capacity for Vieques. Despite indefinite scheduling, the cargo ferries have been filled up instantly to absorb the extra space available. This incident has made a dramatic positive improvement on our abilities to do business with the main island and to economically visit government and medical offices. We would have been overwhelmingly pleased if this level of ferry support were to have continued, but of course, it ended.

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.

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. We have some of the worst health statistics in Puerto Rico. 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. Monopolies are the rule. Monopolies form for one of two reasons: either there is inadequate market support for multiple competitors (How many yacht dealers could Vieques support?) or the existing merchant works to prevent competition from gaining access to the market. In either case, 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.

Vehicle service and 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!

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. 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.

Just a cursory review of the existing ferry system shows inadequate and inappropriate locations, facilities, equipment, and operations. As a person who spent a few years in aviation operations and maintenance, I can cite many, many details of failure here. Keeping this discussion a “top down”, overall perspective, political management of this technical operation has been a disaster. The ATM demonstrates an appalling lack of competence, as well as a lack of sensitivity and concern for the wellbeing of thousands of Puerto Ricans. It is hard to believe that the past operation of the system was anything less than an attempt to punish Vieques for something, or an indication of some criminal scheme by ATM officials.

Basic and immediate improvements could include:

1. Add ferries that carry both passengers and cargo (such as Cayo Largo) to replace the passenger-only boats and to double and **triple** the cargo/vehicle service.
2. Utilize the Mosquito Pier-Ceiba route for most cargo trips to permit rapid turnaround of the fleet and enable several more cycles per day with the same crews (probably Vieques based) and fuel usage. The added benefits are no in-town truck congestion and rapid loading.
3. Implement a new auto/truck fare structure with nominal rates for vehicles registered in Vieques.

4. Bid out all or part of the ferry service to contractors and/or operate as a partnership with the government – contractor provided services regulated by the government.

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, quit! Give the federal subsidy to private companies who bid the routes. Stop fighting competition: stop using government leverage ***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 your involvement and assistance. We are all in a period of dire fiscal constraints, but ***this issue is a catastrophe for our community and deserves both priority attention and action.***

This issue is so obvious and so memorable that people do not forget it easily (15 for 10,000 versus 12 for 2,000). It is not going to go away until the embargo is lifted.

Thank you very much for your attention to our plight. Anything that you can do to foster a successful, rapid, redesign of a new system of scheduled cargo ferries to help Vieques out of its dismal economic situation and to improve the quality of life for our 10,000 residents will be appreciated and remembered! Can you confirm (or direct me to someone who can) the amount of subsidies that the ATM receives to transport passengers and cargo to and from Vieques?

Sincerely,

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