

Roadblock to Sustainable Development of Vieques

There is apparent consensus that the future of Vieques is fundamentally rooted in tourism. 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.

Cargo Ferry Services:

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. However, 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 authority.

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!

Island Issues:

We have one of the highest unemployment levels in Puerto Rico. Can we create jobs for our residents or start and run businesses without adequate cargo service? Have we not 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, can we afford to rent cars every week to make repeated visits to offices and clinics? How many visits to government offices are required to obtain a driver's license, legal document, permit, etc.? How many trips to

doctor's offices and hospitals are necessary to secure appointments with specialists or to receive physical treatment?

How do students attending schools on the main island cope with very lengthy and circuitous routes of public transportation? Is it reasonable to add even more burden to the challenges young people face trying to get an education?

Are household goods, food, fuel, building materials, services, etc. available here and at reasonable prices? Is this acceptable? 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, does Vieques suffer from higher prices, reduced customer service, and inadequate product availability? Shopping 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.

Solutions:

1. Add ferries that carry both passengers and cargo to replace the horrible passenger-only boats and to double or 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 and fuel usage.
3. Implement a new 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.

We are in a period of dire fiscal constraints, but this issue is a crisis for our community and deserves both priority attention and action. 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.

Citizen Actions:

We know that we are being exploited. We know that our transport services are being constrained. We know that our access to products and services is being denied. We know the cause is linked directly to restricted cargo ferry services. We know we must speak out with focus: our communication must be clear, accurate, concise, and repeated.

This issue is so obvious and so memorable that people do not forget it easily (15 for 10,000 versus 12 for 2,000). Let's get the government to see the economic value of a prosperous Vieques and lift the embargo. Let's facilitate the sustainable development of Vieques.