

## No Privatization of the Ferries

Despite announcements last fall that the ATM (Autoridad de Transporte Marítimo) was going to become one of the first organizations to be brought into the Public Private Partnership program, that effort was terminated. Just recently, however, according to *Caribbean Business*:

Transportation Secretary Rubén Hernández Gregorat told CARIBBEAN BUSINESS he was putting final touches on a draft proposal and expected to release it early this month so a private operator could be in place before year-end.

'It will run like the Urban Train. The assets and vessels will belong to the government, while the operation and maintenance of those vessels will be done by the private sector,' Hernández said.

'By October or November, if everything goes according to process, we should have a contract for a private operator supporting the maintenance and operations of the ferries,' he added.

There seems to be a major misunderstanding. Our Senator, Lornna Soto Villanueva, countered with great emphasis that there are no existing plans to privatize the ATM. As a senator and wife of Anthony J. Irizrry Perez, ATM Deputy Executive Director of Internal Security, she should know what she's talking about.

Last year at this time we were in the midst of a transportation crisis. We were reduced to a single operational ferry for both Vieques and Culebra, and deliveries came to a near standstill. For weeks the service was almost non-existent. We had protests, meetings, and a boycott of services. It was a true low point for the ATM and for us.

As an outcome of the unified efforts of the Vieques community, hearings were held to officially review community complaints and concerns. A list of 18 specific requests was formalized and accepted by the ATM. The list included primarily operational issues related to the passenger ferry service. Over the last 9 months many items have been addressed. The major advancement to come out of the effort was the working relationship of the Board of Advisors to the ATM. The board is composed of five members:

1. Secretario, Departamento Transportación y Obras Públicas
2. Director of the Ports Authority
3. Mayor of Vieques
4. Mayor of Culebra
5. Local resident

Last year, while discussing the Advisory Board with Mayor Evelyn Delerme Comacho, she expressed her utter frustration that the board was totally unworkable. The public works and port authority representatives blocked

everything she tried to do, including filling the citizen position that had long been vacant on the board. Things have changed since the protests.

A committee was formed by the director of the Board to evaluate every aspect of the services provided to Culebra and Vieques. Professionals in finance and operations were included on the committee, and their report stated that the operation was in chaos and totally mismanaged. While no surprise to any of us that used the ferry, it made such an impact on the Director that he declared a state of emergency. The interim director of the ATM was ultimately replaced by Ferdinand Cedeno, who has been charged with making the system work and implementing the service improvements requested. The committee evaluation led the Board to believe that (with the recommended changes) the operation is feasible within the current funding once they get the organization operating efficiently and catch up on the backlog.

While Mayor Evelyn Delorme still keeps the option of legal action against the ATM as a backup, she is confident that the Board of Advisors is making good progress toward the goals of better service and more cargo ferries without raising ticket prices. So, what can we expect in the near future? She tells *Vieques Events* that:

1. The passenger ferry operation is going to remain in Isabel Segunda, period. A new ferry terminal and dock have been designed and are currently out for bid. The money has been approved and is ready. The contractors will be required to ensure that the ferries can operate without being relocated.
2. Relocation of the cargo ferry to Mosquito Pier will proceed after final approvals from the Army Corp. of Engineers and the Coast Guard. Money has been allocated for the required improvements.
3. The cargo ferry fleet will expand with the renovation of the Santa Maria. While not the kind of cargo ferry we really need, it might work short term while we're still struggling for added capacity.
4. New Port Authority facilities opening soon include a dry dock repair capacity eliminating most work being done in St. Thomas and the States. Additionally, increasing the inventory of major part items is being contracted from local suppliers.
5. The Board is currently analyzing a plan for cargo ferry expansion that is directed toward service on weekends: three per day. While some may justifiably argue that a better allocation would include four trips per weekday rather than the three we suffer with now, weekend trips were petitioned for in the complaint to the ATM. By adding another Fajardo departure at 8PM, ferry users could have 10 useful hours of shopping or running errands rather than be limited to 6 hours.
6. Parity with Culebra, not balance or fairness. It is totally unjustified that Culebra receives comparable cargo service to us given that our population is 5 times theirs (1818 to 9301 in the 2010 census), and they are allocated

12 ferries per week to our 15. But, given the structure of the Board of Advisors, the current strategy is for Vieques and Culebra to provide a unified front. Our administration does not wish to risk the delicate alliance by asking for the reallocation of ferries to us. Perhaps the community should.

Cargo ferry service has been considered a secondary issue because the number of people using the cargo ferries is small, and the average resident doesn't realize how critical those services are to the island and the well being of each of us. Therefore, they complain about issues they see with the passenger ferry, which masks the extremely important long term problem. Residents usually know when the fuel trucks can't make it, but do they know that 20 or 30 people might be out of work because certain building materials didn't arrive due to lack of space on the ferry? Do they know that a food supplier didn't open an outlet on Vieques because he couldn't secure regular slots on the ferry to supply his store? Unemployment, underemployment, and lack of business startups are caused by constraints in the supply system: ferry service. This is EVERYBODY'S problem. We all suffer without jobs and income.

Government does not move quickly, but it is clear that progress has been made. Many passenger ferry issues have been addressed such as identical schedules 7 day per week, medical packages and training, ticket sales hours, etc. Additionally, the system of complaint handling is supposed to allow an individual to write and submit a complaint at the window, and an employee will ensure that it is presented to the Director who will review and respond to each one.

There is reason to be optimistic, but we need to keep the pressure on. Submit formal complaints when problems are observed. When responses are inadequate, let the Mayor's office know.

*A special thanks to Margo Cheney for real time interview translating.*