

6 January 2014

Gloria Ruiz  
El Nuevo Dia

Dear Sra Ruiz,

I read your article about the ATM ferry services to Vieques, and I thought that you might be interested in the real story here. To some extent, this is "same old, same old" in that Vieques is always complaining about the lack of access to the main island no matter what the ATM does. There is a powerful reason for this: The ATM doesn't ever fix the problem! For the last 11 years that I've been here, with rare exceptions, the service has been horrible. How can the government of a sophisticated US territory provide only Third World level transportation services? We can count the ways:

1. The ATM is a bloated bureaucracy that was established decades ago, and it has long since been hijacked by patronage and internal special interests to the point of near total dysfunction. It currently operates for the benefit of the employees and not at all for us, its clients. Once a bureaucracy reaches a certain size and has a powerful union, efforts to change it never work. That is probably why Fortuno was moving it toward a PPP.
2. Let it be said that the ATM has some very good people working at various levels including agents and crews, but there are many other employees that game the system for overtime and other rewards and sabotage efforts to better serve the clients. We have employees in the Vieques office who won't sell tickets ahead of time and tell everyone to come back and go standby. The Greater Scott (Fast Ferry) is often sent out without many passengers or cars because one or more employees won't sell the people in line a ticket for it. Managers and other employees know about this but do nothing.
3. The maintenance operation is a farce. Look at the number of boats that they have and the number in service at any one time over the last 5 years. Part is the lack of preventive maintenance, which is FAR less expensive than corrective work. Second, there is seldom, if ever, work done at night when the boats are idle. Third, the harbors at Vieques and Fajardo are shallow and filled with debris. They could easily be dredged or moved to the deep harbors of Mosquito Pier and Ceiba (see below).
4. The trip from Vieques to Fajardo is over 20 miles each way. The distance from Mosquito Pier to Ceiba is less than 7 miles. (The distance from Culebra to Ceiba is actually slightly less than to Fajardo as well.) The operational costs including fuel, wear and tear, and labor can be significantly reduced by relocating the cargo ferries. The cost of this relocation has been quoted by the government at under a million dollars, and 75% of that would be federal money. How long would it take to make up the required \$250,000 in saved fuel costs? 2 months? After that, it's money in the bank! AND, the mayor of Ceiba is willing to provide additional infrastructure as required.
5. The current route utilizes two ports that don't have the capacity to handle truck traffic safely or passenger traffic efficiently – and they never have. The bridge in Vieques that all trucks leaving the port must cross is rated by the DTOP as having a 15 ton safety

limit. The trucks supplying the island routinely exceed the limit by a factor of two or more. Fuel trucks have over 25 tons of gasoline alone, plus the weight of the truck! Secondly, there is NO place for cars to park near the dock, and the town of Isabel Segunda suffers from the overflow hurting local businesses. The Fajardo area is a nightmare for drivers, requiring 15 minutes or more to leave the congested port due to a single stoplight that continues year after year to generate lines as long as a half mile.

6. This is not rocket science, it's politics. The solutions are obvious and do not cost a penny more. This aggressive neglect to our future is appalling. It's corruption of the worst kind. With the highest unemployment and poverty level, why would our government choke us like this?

Under our current short term situation, the question arises over whether to retain Fast Ferries or let them go. Here are several considerations:

1. While it is true that the Greater Scott is not an optimal boat, it does provide both additional and backup service for Vieques. Additionally, the boat is operated very well, and the crew is excellent. The problem is getting the Vieques operations employees to utilize it to the maximum rather than sabotage it.
2. Big Cat, the passenger boat serving Culebra, is VERY fast, effective, and loved by the folks there. If this contract is not renewed, we in Vieques would lose Greater Scott AND one other boat required to make up the difference for Culebra. We would slip into a world of major hurt.
3. It is my understanding that the money for the contract paid to Fast Ferries is not part of the regular budget for the Vieques-Fajardo-Culebra operation, but is a special fund and in no way is money taken from the maintenance budget, as some would have us believe.

Our long term solution should be easy, but nothing involving politics ever is. Simply put, we need to put out an RFP, Request for Bid, for a contract to supply a ferry operation between Mosquito Pier and Ceiba as we specify it. Schedules, accommodations, services, etc. would be dictated, and failures to perform up to specs penalized. The contract could be paid for and the ticket prices dictated by the a Commonwealth agency. The contractor would merely collect the money as instructed and not in any way be setting the prices.

You cannot believe the level of frustration and helplessness that we experience here. The animosity that we feel toward the powerbrokers who are suppressing our efforts to grow our tourism, improve our wellbeing, and provide a future for our children has no rational outlet. We have written to many government agencies and appealed to our representatives at various levels, but we get only lip service.

I tried to call your number 787-447-6437, but it appears not to be correct. If you wish to speak to me, please call. If you are not interested in following up with this subject, please let me know that so that I can contact others who might. Thank you.

More ferry articles and letters from the last several years:  
<http://viequesverde.biz/commentary.htm>