

A UNIFIED VIEQUES CONFRONTS A CRISIS

Residents and tourists alike have suffered from inadequate ferry service for years and years, but the situation has become so critical lately that the community has risen up and, via the legislative assembly, has said “Basta ya” (enough is enough). While over the past decade most of us complained extensively about both the quantity and quality of ferry service, we were ineffective. Some small groups tried to inspire action, but they were unable to light the community fire. Not any more!

Since arriving in office, Mayor Evelyn Delerme Comacho has been working via the system to correct numerous injustices leveled against those of us who live and visit here, but she’s been mostly ignored by the main island government agencies. Things are changing. She has become (as Peter Finch in the 1976 movie *Network*) “...as mad as hell, and ... not going to take this anymore!” There is a New Mayor in town, and she’s got a new weapon – a unified community.

The crisis brews with the ferry system (Autoridad de Transporte Marítimo).

Since the summer began, one-by-one the boats have dropped out of service. Schedules have become delayed, and travelers have faced cancellations. Both residents and tourists have been stranded. Cargo required for survival here has not arrived. Medical appointments have been missed. This crisis reached the point of forcing ATM to rent the Aluma boat (Inner Island Ferry) and their crew to deliver our cargo because the ATM had no working boats.

Ibsen Santiago, the Executive Director for ATM, has said that he has all of the equipment needed to meet our demand. *How do people keep their jobs and explain to their bosses that close to 100% of their fleet is not seaworthy?* The ATM spokesperson has said that this is standard for this time of year. The Governor has stated that all is well, and the full fleet will be in service by August 30th. *What are they all smoking?*

On Monday, August 2nd a protest of about 75-100 people marched at the ferry dock in anticipation of reaching the governor. A reporter was present, but the governor was a no-show. Wednesday evening, August 11th, a community meeting was held to determine what action should be taken regarding the ferry crisis. 200 or so people of all political camps attended to hear speakers explain their thoughts on the disintegration of the transportation system and what to do about it. Many position speeches were made outlining major problems and offering different suggestions for improvements and community action. The common thread of almost every presentation was unity. Seldom in our recent history have we seen the three political parties provide a unified response in lock step with the spirit of the community.

In subsequent interviews with some of the evening’s speakers, more detail was provided:

The Honorable Evelyn Delerme Comacho (Mayor, NPP) explained that after she had raised the issue numerous times catching media attention, the ATM and the governor finally promised that the system would be at full force by the 30th of August.

She maintains that if the system is not set right by their date, that Viequenses should take action – a total boycott of the system and protest at the pier.

She voiced the universally accepted premise that the management of the ATM does not care one bit about Vieques. Their jobs are political, and, as long as they keep getting paid, there is no problem to them. She is a member of the ATM Advisory Board, along with the mayor of Culebra, President of the Port Authority, Director of Public Works for Transportation, and an appointed citizen (Francisco Romero was just appointed by the municipal assembly). To date, she has been unable to muster a majority on this board to improve the services to the islands. The deck has been stacked against her, and therefore, no input from Vieques is used in any decision making at the ATM.

Ismael Guadalupe (Independista) felt that a commission should be formed to examine the situation and make recommendations to levels above the ATM. He's very energized by the unity in the community and the parties - a firm believer in "united we stand, divided we fall".

{first name?} **Geigel (PDP)** explained that one of the reasons that we have no boats available is that Coast Guard recertification is required every year (during the summer) for each boat, and certain maintenance functions are required. Despite being totally predictable, some how, this seems to take everyone by surprise. These people don't plan, and they care not about Viequenses or tourists.

Employees of the ATM from Vieques have differing opinions based upon whether they are boat crew members or work at the pier. Jobs would be created and employee count would go up with expanded cargo services. Many at the pier do not have whole-day employment and would receive the benefit of longer hours if services were expanded. Crews receive full day employment and pay, but currently spend much of their time waiting around in Fajardo for the next departure. Crews would be working more if ferries were added.

Summarizing the common criticisms, on a good day, the ferry system is totally inadequate to serve the needs of the island:

- Only 3 cargo ferries five days a week: we need about 8 ferries (leaving simultaneously for Vieques and Fajardo/Ceiba for six days a week and 3 or 4 on Sundays.
- Unsuitable facilities and routes: Do whatever it takes to get the short route from Mosquito Pier to Ceiba for the cargo ferries ASAP; cut the transit time to 20 minutes and double the service immediately with the same crews and fuel consumption.
- Ridiculous schedules: stagger departures - everything happens at once in Fajardo and Vieques causing chaos and anxiety; and, it's timed so that we arrive in Fajardo in the morning to wait 30 or more minutes at the infamous traffic light due to horrible infrastructure and congestion.
- Totally inappropriate boats: expanded ingress-egress options on both sides of boats; more or wider doors and ramps for rapid loading and unloading; design for "day trip" using inside and outside seating options that don't freeze a

- passenger from air conditioning or bathe one in carcinogenic diesel fumes; choose cargo boats that carry passengers as well (like Cayo Largo), but build with features that make certain that getting on and off is safe for all; don't use tall, hulky boats that rock back and forth making people sick.
- Vieques terminal non existent: if the system is going to require that we queue up to buy tickets (which is ridiculous in the first place – could buy them on the boat), then at least make a weather protected area; and if people are going to be required to wait outside the boats (we should be allowed to board as we arrive) then there must be protected seating for everyone.
 - Treat us like customers, not inmates or refugees: keep us informed, be proactive (tell us before we are delayed rather than acknowledging the delay after the fact); use technology like the airlines do with TV monitors (the broken down PA systems are incomprehensible in any language).
 - Be sensitive and be prepared: recognize that many passengers are infirm and not very mobile and are going to the main island to seek necessary medical care; have all crew members CPR certified; have first aid equipment, an automated external defibrillator (AED), oxygen, etc. on each passenger ferry.

Recognizing that appeal to an uncaring Executive Director of the ATM would be a waste of time, there is total agreement that lobbying and attention getting activities need to target those above the ATM level. Any massive protest will be picked up by the media. Letters to government officials should be sent often and addressed to:

Our Representative: Johnny Mendez cmendez@camaraderepresentantes.org
Our Senators: Lornna J. Soto Villanueva lsoto@senadopr.us
 Hector Martinez Maldonado hmartinez@senadopr.us
Resident Commissioner: Pedro Pierlisi via staff: Geenae.Rivera@mail.house.gov
Governor: Luis G. Fortuño via staff: mmelende@ogp.gobierno.pr

Vieques has been a steady recipient of good press for our many tourist attractions and quality of life, but at the same time, our Commonwealth government has treated us with great disrespect and violated our civil rights. Governor Fortuño has made considerable efforts to grow tourism and has created several stimulus programs for our benefit. It is clear that certain entities in the government want us to prosper, but there are others that are making it impossible. Our community is exceptionally united and, with the support of all of us, we will solve this problem. Mayor Evelyn Delerme is prepared to take our issues to federal court, and that will get more than just a little attention.

Thanks to all of those who shared their views and a special thanks to “Chino” José Williams who provided translation required during interviews.