

## Huge Gain for Expanded Cargo Services to Vieques

The implementation of an expanded ferry system through the use of a private company has made the main island far more accessible to Vieques and Culebra residents. This is the greatest improvement in cargo service that anyone here can recall.

PR Fast Ferries is a private company owned and operated by a Highway Department contractor who normally builds roads. This firm has been contracted through December to provide additional ferry services at an all inclusive cost to DTOP (not the ATM) of just over \$10 million.

There are printed cargo ferry schedules/signs at the ATM offices and paper copies are available as well. Despite claims by ferry personnel that the published schedules are correct, **they are not**. The actual schedule is shown in the sidebar, but things change without notice.

The ATM staff makes all scheduling decisions for both their boats and the private ferries, and changes are made on the fly as deemed necessary. Although the number of round trips per day has doubled, the additional trips have been scheduled in the middle of the day and don't extend the hours of operation, which leads to chaos and delays in Fajardo. Generally, the first trip to Fajardo and the last trip to Vieques are reserved by bigger trucks and commercial vehicles that cannot use the private boats. This means that the resident must fit his or her activities into an 8:30 AM departure and a 2:30 PM return.

The heights of the decks above the pier vary from boat to boat and tide conditions. The new boats are higher and a bit challenging. No plans are being made to install movable/adjustable ramps. According to Mayor Evelyn Delorme, efforts are being made to move the cargo ferry to the short route soon (Rompeola to Ceiba), but federal and state governmental approvals are still not available. Remodel and repair plans for the existing pier and terminal in Isabel Segunda are approved and contracted, but the money has not arrived.

There are no schedule changes for the passenger ferry, but residents are sometimes treated to a very fast ride on the private catamaran. A new big passenger ferry is due to come online in September.

The Mayor's lawsuit against the ATM is still in the courts, and all things considered, we've seen some marked improvement. Now, we need to focus on expanding the day by spreading out the schedule to move one of the mid-afternoon ferries into the evening.