

WHY IS THE FERRY SERVICE SO INADEQUATE?



Tail of the Dog!

Long-term Systemic Problems

From the perspective of the users, the ATM is one of the civilized world's worst transportation systems. A combination of factors, called P5, serve to explain the mystery.

Politics

Of course, all things good and bad in government are rooted in the political system and modified by individual politicians at every level. Politics is responsible for the setting the priorities, selecting the personnel, formulating the budgets, maintaining the stability and consistency during transitions, and a host of other lesser consequences.

Priorities

With a PR population over three million, 12,000 people living in Vieques and Culebra do not represent anything but a rounding error in the voter rolls. Our smaller islands are far from the center of power, have no weight in our assembly districts, contribute next to nothing to political campaigns, complain extensively about our poor treatment, and are looked down on by the ruling elite in San Juan. We have NO priority – they would prefer we disappear and stop bothering them.

With little to no priority, our budget allotments are barely at survival levels. We are not allocated sufficient resources to live healthy, comfortable, or convenient lives. This withholding of priority status for us has been common to every administration for decades, and probably forever. It is no secret in the ATM that the central government merely pretends to care when there is a publicized problem. **Without a priority change in the Governor's office and the General Assembly, nothing good for us will ever occur, period. They are responsible!**

Process

Like all government agencies in Puerto Rico, the plans, laws, rules, procedures, and operations of all services are designed and implemented utilizing the ideas and opinions of the bureaucrats and their consultants - who are often fed the flawed data supplied by incompetents. Garbage in yields garbage out! As the program is almost ready to roll out, "public hearings" are scheduled to present the new system, and comments are solicited. This occasion is usually the first opportunity for the stakeholders to become informed and involved; however, the comments and concerns are moot because the decisions have already been made.

Any meaningful hearing must take place at the beginning so that the ideas and needs of the stakeholders can inform the design of the solution. This is a normal process throughout the States and other democracies. The procedure that we fall victim to is common in dictatorships that are trying to look democratic. In so many cases, we are horrified when the program is presented to us, so our only acceptable courses of action are protest and lawsuits. But the laws are flawed. Because the laws do not force the government to include stakeholders, officials are free to dictate the solution and are only required to consider the comments at the end, when it is essentially too late.

Privatization

This is an ambiguous commonly used word that can mean:

- *Government transfer of a business or service to private sector ownership **and/or** control;*
- *Government contracting of a business or service with the private sector; or*
- *Government "partnering" with the private sector to operate government owned assets.*

The primary legal and justifiable reasons for government to involve the private sector are:

- Raising money through selling assets and/or securing additional investment funds;
- Extracting the government from an uneconomical or losing political venture; and
- A government lack of technical expertise to effectively run the operation.
- Granting of favors to "rent seekers", cronies, and political donors are common illegal purposes.

Privatization of the ATM is being attempted for all of the above reasons. Privatization of any government service is neither good nor bad on its face. To be good, it is important that the process is structured to effectively achieve the community's goals. Properly designed, a contract can facilitate the enforcement of strict compliance with the needs of the customers, including everything from operational performance to fees for services. The existing ATM P3 program has been expressly created to give the stakeholders no meaningful input into the contract or the operation. Clearly, this is not good.

The devil is always in the details, and the ultimate determinant of success is the outcome for the stakeholders. But how can any community satisfaction result from P3 legislation that allows the process of defining the bidding and performance specifications to be created and approved

without the knowledge of, nor input from, the users, customers, and existing service providers? IT CAN'T! It's selling out our people; it's flimflam!

The law presumes that the "superior" insight of the backroom P3 architects trumps the actual experiences, opinions, and needs of everyone else. No mechanism is provided or offered to educate, discuss, collect meaningful data, or exchange ideas with the community. Officials' ignorance of the issues, susceptibility to influence peddling, and lack of best-practice expertise in the industry are hidden from public view due to a total lack of transparency and a wall of legal protections designed for that purpose. That arrogance of the elite ruling class that was protested-out-of-office still permeates the mentality of many who remain.

The losing battle that is being waged by Viequenses to improve the ATM is not primarily a war for or against privatization, but rather a plea to our government to listen to us and fix the deplorable, dysfunctional system - or to FINANCIALLY SUPPORT US IN DOING SO OURSELVES. The problem is that the people in charge of creating the solution are not qualified and have not included the stakeholders in specifying the needs of the communities of Vieques and Culebra.

Protests

Lawsuits being a waste of time for most incidents, and the only avenue perceived to be available to effect change is protesting. We have been protesting the ATM service for decades, but we have achieved no lasting improvements. Why?

1. We are not a priority of our government.
2. Our numbers are small and our influence inconsequential.
3. We have outspoken members of the community whose opinions are not universal, and this makes us look like children who don't know what they want.

Vieques had a very long struggle to oust the Navy, but with the help of celebrities and large numbers on the main island, the tipping point was reached. The recent resignation of Rosselló to extensive protesting with ever-increasing numbers also worked. It is extremely unlikely that any amount of protesting with our numbers and in the fashion of the 60's is going to generate impact sufficient to accomplish anything.

Short-term Operational Problems

The harried effort of Rosselló to privatize the ferry was caused by his desire to dump the ATM problem onto someone else as fast as possible. He treated it like a time bomb that was getting ready to explode, so he expedited moving the operation to Ceiba and Mosquito, and in the process, got the cart before the horse. His people were too few and too inexperienced to pull it off competently. The result has been layers of compounded expensive mistakes, errors, and omissions: the epitome of Ready, Shoot, Aim! Coincidentally, but totally forecastable, the lack of serviceable boats and the horribly clumsy and negligent formation of the amended PR Private Ferry Contract, has led to a service catastrophe that has defied any short-term solution to capacity.

Ultimately, Mara Perez was selected as Director to quickly get the PPP deal completed and move on. It would have made sense if the privatizing process she inherited hadn't been so poorly handled and the infrastructure so inadequate.

The common demands of vocal protestors reflect their frustrations with the lack of meaningful response to our problems. Unfortunately, the focus is misguided:

1. The problem is not Mara, she's the scapegoat. It's her bosses. Replacing her will be a false victory, make the Governor look like she is making an improvement, and distract attention from the real issue of gaining priority from our government.
2. Moving the ferry terminal back to Fajardo is **not** going to happen, so focus must be on improvements to the Ceiba – both infrastructure and operations, to include scheduling, ticket sales, parking, etc.
3. Mosquito Pier for cargo is essential. We can't confuse the issue by broadly demanding to keep the operation in Isabel Segunda. Be clear, however, that many people want to have the passenger service remain as is. Maybe with small fast boats?
4. We need to emphasize over and over that our capacity is constrained, and we need more scheduled trips. Our real issue is not about the priorities of residents versus tourists: we absolutely need both. The data they use to justify reducing service are faulty. We have other data that they ignore.

Summary

Any real long-term solution requires that the politicians give us a higher priority than we have currently. Without gaining their real support, no satisfactory result is in sight. The FOMB, Governor, and the General Assembly must be made to recognize our plight. Any strategic actions we take at this point should solicit that support.

The existing P3 bid process for privatization may be dead in the water due to the mess discovered over the last several months. Nonetheless, we should lobby to have it put on hold or nullified until we, as a community, can review it to determine whether it will actually provide the service we require.

If we are unable to convince the government to do the right thing, we must move toward doing it ourselves.