

In referring to the unfortunate ferry (ATM) debacle last weekend resulting in the resignation of Director Juan Maldonado, Vieques Mayor, Victor Emeric, was right, the problem is not the misuse of an idle cargo ferry, it's the 50 years of criminal ATM mismanagement that has plagued the interisland transportation system upon which our lives depend. Some have vilified the unwitting wedding couple for abusing the system, but I believe the blame is totally misplaced and that we may all look back at this event as the tipping point in our struggle. I think they unknowingly created an element of the perfect storm that has reached beyond Vieques and Culebra, and is affecting the status quo in our central government. Vieques responses to being treated as inmates rather than as citizens continue to be the source of PR government hand wringing and embarrassment. Our reaction to their inattention to our problems and their refusal to involve our citizens in their opaque creation of useless imposed solutions provides a focus on the process broadcast to a large audience.

This is another crisis in the long list of ATM crises. But every crisis provides an opportunity. We know:

1. The governor wants this short-term problem to go away and get the situation out of the news.
2. The governor wants the long-term ATM problem to go away via a public-private partnership (PPP).
3. The government wants to reduce the subsidies required to operate the service.
4. The ATM wants to maintain the status quo.
5. Vieques and Culebra are entitled to adequate capacity for both cargo and passengers.
6. Vieques and Culebra require the scheduling of trips that provide sufficient space available for passage and convenience to all users including residents, businesses (both to and from Isla Grande), and visitors going both directions.
7. Vieques and Culebra want quick and efficient transition from arrival and embarkation through disembarkation and departure from the ports.
8. Vieques and Culebra need nearby, economical, secure parking at all ports.
9. Vieques and Culebra should have clean, weather protected, and easy to use facilities for all functions at the ports - from parking, to sidewalks, to rest rooms.
10. Passengers are entitled to quick, respectful, and convenient ticket purchasing online and in person.
11. Customers must be kept informed and notified of any and all changes to the schedules.
12. Customer assistance procedures should be integrated into all areas from giving directions to helping loading, etc.
13. Adequate, convenient, and economical landside transportation options and procedures must be implemented at all ports.
14. Vieques residents are pleading to minimize the secure area (as in fencing the small areas around the actual loading areas just as EVERY other port in our system) to allow traditional users of Mosquito Pier to continue their activities.
15. Most stakeholders strongly feel that the proposed use of the passenger pier at Mosquito not be used by the ATM to allow continued fishing, SCUBA, and snorkeling in the surrounding waters and to protect the valuable sea life that will be endangered with the operation of the ferry. This could be accomplished in one of two ways:
 - a. Keep the passenger ferry operating out of Isabell II permanently.
 - b. Operate only combination cargo and passenger boats to Vieques (via Mosquito) to reduce crew, fuel, and other related costs. Build a finger pier at the cargo docking area for side loading of passengers.

We have an elected representative group ready and able to sit down with the new director in a spirit of cooperation and discuss options and realities for mutually acceptable solutions. No previous director has accepted our offer to meet, but maybe this time will be different.

It is clear that we are going to be working with the ATM for a long time, and we need to make the best of our relationship. Efforts to privatize the operation are unlikely to be successful while the RFP (request for proposal) includes language implied by the new director, Mara Perez Torres, in an interview with El Nuevo Dia:

“The 122 employees of the ATM would become employees of the private company, but they would retain the benefits and rights they acquired in the government, Pérez Torres said.”

Requirements to use the same boats and crews while reducing costs and risking being compensated ad hoc by the legislature carries the concept of “trust me” way too far. One of the five qualified bidders has already withdrawn in disgust. When the remaining four depart it will be “déjà vu all over again”.