

Something is terribly wrong with the relationship between Vieques and the Commonwealth.

Vieques is treated like the bastard stepchild, or as my friends and neighbors say: “the tail of the dog”. Our lives here are controlled in many ways by appointed absentee political hacks and indifferent bureaucratic structures insulated from us by protective policies, inaccessibility, and distance. While our legislative representatives may care about us, we are such a small fraction of their responsibility that other areas carry far more sway (votes).

Naturally, life on a small island comes with limitations and inconveniences associated with the difficult logistics of transporting people and cargo back and forth. While the isolation can be a hassle, it also contributes to the quality of life one enjoys away from the hustle and bustle of more main stream communities. Our Commonwealth has become more and more socialistic (has been the largest employer), and our citizens have developed greater dependence on government to provide services and opportunities. Progress had been made to offer some of these services in Vieques, but under the current economic situation, cutbacks have caused the closing of local offices and many government offerings and demands require visiting offices located throughout Isla Grande.

Our road to government offices currently passes through 26 miles of ocean. This road is barely accessible, and we are totally dependent on the ATM. The entire ferry system (ATM) is now, and has been, so totally mismanaged that it has almost single-handedly crushed the economy of Vieques and is dashing the hopes for our future.

There is almost total consensus that the future of Vieques is fundamentally rooted in tourism (we have absolutely nothing else), and to that end, we need to develop our island’s infrastructure and amenities in a sustainable manner. We want to improve our quality of life without losing our way of life or damaging our natural resources. Unfortunately, the current cargo ferry system makes this utterly impossible. ***Under the long-term, government enforced embargo, the shipment of goods and vehicles between Vieques and Isla Grande has been so constrained that our community is not economically viable.*** The extreme restriction of cargo services denies us the ability to live normal lives, start and run businesses, and grow the community as we see fit.

THE PROBLEM

The fact that the cargo services to Vieques are a fraction of what is needed is incontestable: Vieques has a permanent population of about 9,200 people plus part time residents and tourists. We are allocated only 15 cargo ferries per week to supply all of the island’s needs. In comparison, Culebra with a population of approximately 1,800 plus tourists is allocated 12. The math reveals the obvious intent of the authority to hold us down

and suppress any possibility of prosperity. We should have triple the round trips we currently have.

An allocation of 15 cargo ferries a week is a subsistence level of supply for Vieques, but we can't even count on those 15 with any confidence. The schedule is subject to change without notice, and we can experience months with no ferries running on schedule but a few running randomly. At that point we drop to survival mode with only food and fuel plus a handful of standby vehicles able to make the trip.

So what is the problem? Systemic, total, and absolute incompetence permeates the organization at all levels and in every way. The ATM has been a horrible, sick operating company for decades, but the cancer has grown so much that it is inoperable: it is NOT SALVAGEABLE! One cannot see any way to fix the organization short of total replacement.

The multi-layered bureaucracy is political at every level and has none of the competence required to run the ATM properly. Managers or workers at any level can kill the operation either through incompetence or intent to make others (above and/or below) look bad or to protect their own positions. Relative immunity from discharge has effectively removed the possibility of correcting anything at any level and allowed the cancer to rage out of control. We are dying.

The ATM is charged with organizing, training, and equipping a fleet to provide reasonable access to the main island for the citizens of the lesser islands of Vieques and Culebra. In order to accomplish this, they must operate a ferry system:

1. Organization – This includes having a vision and a plan to accomplish it. There is no comprehensible vision, and certainly no acknowledged plan. The bureaucracy has morphed into an unmanageable mess, impossible to unravel or straighten out. No command given at the top will ever reach the bottom and be properly executed.
2. Training – Nonexistent or inadequate at best. Lack of established procedures for operations and maintenance results in chaos. Without properly established procedures, what does one train? Who in the organization has been sufficiently trained to train his or her subordinates? Most things are done by guesswork or tradition, not professionally. When water gets pumped into the fuel tank by a seasoned employee is it incompetence or sabotage? When alcoholic captains repeatedly damage boats is it an accident or a cover-up?
3. Equipping: passenger ferries - Wholly inappropriate for the purpose. The rag tag group of vessels is laughable. First, the boats are dissimilar in size and therefore difficult to schedule through substitution. Second, being different, their maintenance requirements, parts inventory, and personnel expertise are also varied. Third, the boats themselves are

- closed boxes with freezing cold AC or have a small back deck which (through poor design) funnels the engine diesel fumes right into the space. Fourth, they have a single main door (on one side only) and take forever to load or unload.
4. Equipping: terminal – Horrible places to spend any time. In a properly running reliable system, there should be very little need for terminals to house travelers for hours at a time, but given that the system doesn't operate reliably, waiting in the terminal can take hours or days. Ticket purchase in Vieques requires queuing up outside without cover from the sun or the rain. Clearly decision makers don't care about their customers at all. The terminal in Fajardo is where most riders end up waiting for extended periods of time. While the facility is open, when a boat is tied next to the terminal, it is not unusual for the diesel fumes to flood the terminal area.
 5. Equipping: outside support areas – Inadequate on the easiest of days. Trucks and cars for ferry loading are next to passengers and cause major conflicts and congestion. The drop off and parking areas in Vieques are non-existent and have always led to congestion and gridlock. A regular two lane street gets choked off at every ferry arrival and departure. Parking spills into town and residential streets so that residents and merchants are stuck with cars (all day) making it hard for visitors and patrons to find parking. In Fajardo the situation is similar, but doubly worse because the traffic is for both Culebra and Vieques, and the truck staging area is remote. Exacerbating the issue is that scheduling for both is almost simultaneous. It is usually total chaos and grossly inefficient. Homeland Security and other drug enforcement groups have shown interest in X-raying vehicles arriving and try to setup their huge equipment and stop all traffic (and unloading) for hours due to the small space available.
 6. Equipping: surrounding infrastructure – Unsafe and inhospitable. The route leading to the ferry in Vieques takes the big trucks (gasoline, construction, freight, etc.) right through the tiny streets of Isabel II. This is ridiculous, not to mention dangerous. Belching black clouds of diesel exhaust, these trucks stop traffic and pour through a town we rely upon for our tourism. In Fajardo, the road out of the dock area has been constrained by a traffic light for years and years that backs up traffic for as much as a half hour. AEE (PREPA) has a large tower on one corner (expensive to relocate) and a parking area with a small office (that could be anywhere) on the other corner. This intersection could have been cleaned up with much more efficient design, but nobody cares about us!
 7. Equipping: communications equipment - Inadequate or non-existent. Communications is primarily an operational issue (see below) but having the proper technology and equipment is also essential. First and foremost, there is little real time communication between Fajardo-Vieques-Ferry. Equipment to allow this real time flow of schedules, status, conditions, etc. is not expensive, but it was clear after Irene that the ATM

- has no such capacity, and that is insane! All of this information should be presented to staff and passengers alike via small computer screens located in the terminal and ticketing areas. Making reservations or buying a ticket can be grueling. Trying to make a cargo ferry reservation in Vieques is a function of the attitude of the agent at the window. The computers are purportedly so slow that some of the agents refuse to try to look for availability (they just say “go standby”). None of the agents want to work through the system to schedule multiple trips, so one is required to submit a written request in the fall for all of the dates desired for the next year. Of course, unless you’re a friend or an existing regular, you never hear from them again. The only solution is to go to Fajardo where the system is faster and schedule with them, if you can find someone to help you that day.
8. Operation: scheduling – Optimal for employees, but neither adequate nor appropriate for customers. For cargo ferry users, the schedule is backwards. First, it leaves Fajardo at 4:00 AM to arrive at 5:30 AM in Vieques. What do the vendors who arrive this early in Vieques do? Who is open for business at that time? Where can they go other than park and wait? How many of these drivers and workers are going to end up getting overtime for sitting around? Who is ultimately going to pay? Second, it is then supposed to leave Vieques at 6:00 AM. If all goes well, it will arrive in Fajardo at 7:30. This is part of rush hour, and it can take a half hour to get out of Fajardo and another hour to get to parts of San Juan or Rio Piedras (Central Medical). Third, the midday roundtrip is inconsequential. Fourth, the last Vieques bound trip at 4:30 PM requires a return to the dock at 3:30. So, if everything goes according to plan, the shopper or business person from Vieques has from 7:30 to 3:30 to accomplish the mission. Getting to and from San Juan at these times of day can shorten the available 8 hours to 5 hours. Now, if the ferry runs an hour late (common) the 5 hours can drop to 4 hours. Lastly, the return to Fajardo leaves Vieques at 6:30 PM. That gives the main island visitor 12 hours of business time in Vieques. That’s a long day for the main island vendors coming to work here – a lot of wasted overtime. It’s totally backwards and has been forever.
 9. Operation: communication – Dismal. The organization does not communicate in real time among themselves. Now they all have cell phones and talk to their friends and family constantly, but there appears to be no official communication between the terminal offices and the boats. There is definitely no official posting of boat locations, which boat is assigned to a particular route, ETA, ETD, etc. If a ferry leaves late and will definitely delay a subsequent departure, there is no word of this disseminated. If one calls in from the road to determine if a trip is delayed, there is seldom an answer, but if someone does take the call, there is no official statement. Come and wait is the only option.
 10. Operation: cancellation, unknown, and reschedule – Costly to the people of Vieques. When one’s reservation for the return trip to Vieques is

cancelled, one is stuck in Fajardo until the ATM sees fit to give passage on another boat. Often they won't give a cargo ferry customer a confirmed reservation but tell them to show up for stand-by. People have been stuck for days at their own expense. To add insult to injury, they have been told to remain at the dock so that if they have space, maybe they'll be allowed on. It can be chaotic and a total nightmare. Everything becomes indefinite at the whim of staff seen and unseen. One employee says one thing and another something else, and people don't know what to do.

We judge every organization by the results they achieve. The ATM allows 90 to 100% of the fleet to fall out of service year after year and is unable to make even the minimums of schedules. This conclusively shows both the total incompetence of the ATM and the **aggressive indifference** of the central government to the welfare of the people of Vieques.

THE CONSEQUENCES

Vieques suffers physically (health & safety), economically, and from discrimination (denial of our civil rights) reflected by the lack of reasonable access to the main island.

Physical. Medical services are extremely limited in Vieques, which is understandable given our small size. The capabilities of our emergency room are very limited due to lack of staff and functioning equipment. Our daily needs are impossible to meet locally and access to medical facilities on the main island is imperative. Hundreds of people per week (some people must make the journey one or more times each week) are required to travel to the main island. Since cargo ferry services are so limited, patients can't bring their cars and must rely on public transportation or rent cars which increase the cost of access and require an entire day for a single "appointment". When ferry services are late or random, appointments and medical treatments are missed, and added expenses often incurred.

Our safety in Vieques is often compromised in the area of design and construction. Out of sight and out of mind for so many years during the Navy presence, builders in Vieques did things their own way without regard to Puerto Rican building codes. Since it is difficult for inspectors to travel to Vieques with their vehicles, they seldom cruise the streets. While permits are required for new construction in order to secure power and water, there is no oversight in most projects. For remodels, water and power are already in place, and no permits are checked. The result is that there is very little code compliance in Vieques. Many of the structures (new and old) are not earthquake safe.

Economy. We in Vieques are in a depression far worse than the Great Depression. We have one of the highest unemployment levels in Puerto Rico. We cannot create jobs for our residents or start and run businesses without

adequate cargo service. We have lost existing jobs because the ferry system did not offer the capacity to export containers of materials under federal contract. Growth of existing businesses is constrained, and starting new businesses that require the regular delivery of products and/or materials is generally impossible under our allocation of ferries.

In construction, limited access results in delays of product procurement and delivery, and result in temporary layoffs while waiting for materials. New businesses struggle to open in a timely fashion and lose precious opportunity as completion dates slip due to the same. Much in lost wages and business revenue can be traced back directly or indirectly to our failed ferry system.

New automobile and product maintenance programs require service at dealers located on the main island. Recall work and scheduled maintenance require the delivery of the vehicle or product for a day which is almost impossible with the current ferry system resulting in either high expense or failure to comply (which can lead to shortened life, invalidated warranty, unsafe operation, or just more expense).

Household goods, food, fuel, building materials, services, etc. are only available here in limited quantities and with limited selection. Monopolies are the rule. Monopolies form for one of two reasons: either there is inadequate market support for multiple competitors (How many yacht dealers could Vieques support?) or the existing merchant works to prevent competition from gaining access to the market. In either case, Vieques suffers from higher prices, reduced customer service, and inadequate product availability. Without competition there is no advertising. Without advertising, there is no newspaper. Without a newspaper, we are kept in the dark: divided and conquered.

Approximately 62% (*Caribbean Business*) of our household expenses go to food, utilities, and fuel. In Vieques, each of these suppliers is a local monopoly. Add to this that our pharmacy, vehicle emission inspection, and ferry system are monopolies. Other competitors in various retail operations specialize in some portion of their category and are monopolies in a smaller sense. A huge portion of our monthly expenses are paid to monopolies. The free market, capitalist society is only a fairy tale for us. We are held captive to the local power brokers who do not want expanded access to the main island for us. The cost to the people of Vieques is much more than is obvious:

1. Higher price on goods and services
2. Limited selection of products available
3. Proliferation of lower quality products requiring more maintenance and earlier replacement
4. Long lead times for special orders of higher quality products
5. Horrible customer service and sales facilities
6. Hours of operation dictated by Owner

If Vieques were a wealthy community, the added costs incurred to live here could be written off as the cost to live in paradise. The fact is that we are not wealthy: half of the island is living below the poverty level. Combine the low income level with an extremely high unemployment rate, and factor in the high cost of dealing with monopolies as the major suppliers of goods and services, and the result is catastrophic for us and our future. The core cause of this is INADEQUATE CARGO FERRY SERVICE!

Discrimination. Our civil rights of equal access have been violated and denied by the ATM. Beyond their total incompetence, they have repeatedly and intentionally supported and reinforced a schedule of services that is biased and unfair in the allocation of ferry services to Vieques versus Culebra. While we can all agree that there should be more cargo ferry trips in total, given the number the ATM schedules, the allocation should be 22 trips per week for Vieques and 5 for Culebra. There is no justification for anything less for Vieques. Individual ATM employees have been heard to respond that Culebra has more tourists and therefore more ferries. That argument is totally absurd! The **cargo ferry** volume is primarily based upon the needs of residents and commercial enterprises. While some tourists elect to transport their vehicles, they are not critical to the viability of the islands and represent no valid cause for the disproportional service provided. Most tourists arrive and depart on the weekends when there is no cargo service anyway.

THE SOLUTION

There is no single solution to the immense problem with the ATM that has resulted in this total degenerated, wasteful, self-serving, dysfunctional organization and the accompanying money pit it created. It seems certain, however, that it needs to be completely rebuilt from scratch or totally replaced. It is beyond the point where a little work here and there will accomplish anything.

The charge of the ATM is to provide reasonable access to the main island for the people of Vieques and Culebra for the purposes of moving people and cargo as required for the growth and prosperity of the residents. This access is required of the government by law. It can be provided by a public organization (like the ATM) or a private one with government oversight.

Reasonable access is not fully defined, but could be described as providing passage for those (passengers and cargo) that wish it without significant delay or cost. Currently, scheduled passenger service appears to be adequate for both communities under normal conditions (holidays require extra capacity). For rough figures, Vieques books between 300 and 700 round trips and Culebra 250 to 500 per day. Cargo service for Culebra is likely adequate at about 230 vehicles per week while Vieques transports approximately 320 but requires more than 800 round trips.

Reasonable schedules are essential as well. Locals need to be on the main island before traffic builds and need later returns in the evenings. Midday and afternoon returns are important, too. Weekend volume may be lower for cargo, but vehicle transport is still required on both Saturdays and Sundays.

Customer services such as reservations, ticketing, communications, shelter, etc. should be on a par with similar operations throughout the contemporary world. Plenty of examples are offered throughout the States and in Europe.

The following discussion outlines a possible solution. The details are important, but not essential for this level of presentation. If one part of the solution is deemed infeasible, the remaining parts could be adjusted to accommodate the change(s).

Equipment. The boats used should be selected for their task and their environment. They should be enjoyable – even fun – to ride.

1. The existing fleet should be sold and replaced with four similar boats, having most if not all system components identical. This will aid dramatically in both maintenance and operations for parts inventory, technical expertise, backup, and operational substitution. While the market in used ferries is currently depressed (especially in Europe) and bargains may be had, obtaining similar vessels may take some effort. Outfitting older boats in an identical way should be cost effective. A fleet of new boats would be more costly and take more time.
2. The boats should be drive-through for rapid loading and unloading. Backing on or off would never be necessary.
3. All boats would be combination passenger and cargo. Passengers would ride above the cargo bay and load independently from the vehicles without a conflicting path. Multiple access points would be provided for embarkation.
4. All boats would be configured to include several restrooms, a ticket office, a canteen, and a maintenance facility below. The restrooms should be plentiful, roomy and easily cleaned. The ticket office should allow for the sale of tickets and the making of reservations while in port and while under way. The canteen should allow the sale of food and beverages by an independent contractor (who pays for the concession). The canteen area should include salon seating with tables. The maintenance facility should be created to allow maintenance activity to continue wherever the craft is located. Keep the mechanics, tools, and boats together.
5. Boats should be large enough to accommodate the above requirements. Passenger capacity of 350 and 40 vehicles would be minimums.
6. The cabins should include both outside and inside (air conditioned) seating options. The outside space should include both covered and uncovered seating.

Facilities. The facilities at the ports need not be extensive if immediate boarding and on-board ticket purchases are available. A covered waiting area, restrooms, and adequate, safe parking (cars and trucks) are all that is required. Generally, the boats themselves would not be turning around immediately and travelers could board at will. Restrooms and canteen services on board would suffice. Vehicle boarding would require controls, but should be easy. Ramps and elevated passenger entry would be necessary with upper deck loading.

In Vieques, Mosquito Pier should be used for all ATM functions. In order for combined cargo-passenger operations to be implemented, all activity should be at the same pier. The efficiency and cost savings gained from this type of operation is paramount in improving the ATM services for Vieques.

Some residents are opposed to moving passenger operations out of Isabel II because they can walk to the dock from their homes. It is, however, but a small percentage of the population that actually can (or wants to) walk to the pier – especially in the rain or in the dark. (A simple survey of passengers would show the actual number who walk from home.) Many live within a short drive of the dock and take a car to the drop off or park nearby in town. For them, it is more convenient. For most, however, the parking and access at Mosquito Pier is acceptable, and it is likely that more and more people will actually transport their vehicles as the increased space becomes available. The government must provide us access to the main island but is not required to locate facilities within walking distance of any particular group. The huge savings available from combined operations is clearly justifiable.

Given the momentum already moving toward new facilities at the Isabel II pier, it may be hard to reopen the issue, but it should be. The new terminal design no-doubt reflects the current ATM fleet and operational mentality and must definitely be rethought instead of letting the contract. The ATM will have a far rougher time satisfying the greater needs of Vieques if it keeps the port in Isabel II. All of Vieques will end up suffering so that some will be able to walk to the pier rather than ride like everyone else. Moving the operation will require **new connecting services** such as publicos or other vehicles to convey passengers from town to the pier and back. This is normal throughout the world, but subsidies may be required.

Next, the proposed use of the short route should be expedited. Government indecision about how and where to locate the ferry terminal must end. The route is 6 miles versus 26 miles. The time of transit and related costs are 25% of the current operation. With money always cited as the cause of all the problems, a short route solution can save the day. Instead of talking about why it can't be done, it would be better to just work on making it happen – now! The several million dollars saved by not remodeling the Isabel II pier could be used to construct the required facilities at Mosquito Pier and Ceiba.

Schedules. With boats designed and operated as discussed above, the following schedules exemplify greatly improved services and might significantly reduce operating costs. These are only hypothetical to reflect what could be done and to stimulate discussion.

Culebra:

- Three round trips per day, six days per week to Fajardo
- Monday through Saturday
 - Depart Culebra 5:00 AM & return departing Fajardo 7:00 AM
 - Depart Culebra 9:00 AM & return departing Fajardo 4:00 PM
 - Depart Culebra 6:00 PM & return departing Fajardo 8:00 PM
- Sunday
 - Depart Culebra 8:00 AM & return departing Fajardo 8:00 PM

Vieques:

- Four round trips per day, six days per week to Cieba
- Monday through Saturday
 - Depart Vieques 5:00 AM & return departing Cieba 6:00 AM
 - Depart Vieques 8:00 AM & return departing Cieba 9:00 AM
 - Depart Vieques 3:00 PM & return departing Cieba 4:00 PM
 - Depart Vieques 7:00 PM & return departing Cieba 8:00 PM
- Sunday
 - Depart Vieques 8:00 AM & return departing Cieba 9:00 AM
 - Depart Vieques 7:00 PM & return departing Cieba 8:00 PM

Fare Structure. The overall costs for everything described will likely remain at current levels. While asset costs will rise for new boats and facilities, operational costs may fall if the efficiencies are forthcoming. Therefore, the current fare structure may actually be able to be maintained without additional subsidies. If the boats become more popular, tourists might find the boats pleasurable and rates could be raised for improved services. Additionally, resident discounts may be offered for automobile passage.

ATM Staff. The organization is such a failure at every level that it is hard to stomach keeping any part of it. On the other hand, it is not practical to fire everyone today and hire a new team tomorrow. Some (10% or 70% - who knows) of the people are probably acceptable and just need the right environment to prove themselves. Remaking the organization requires firing a significant percentage of the existing staff – but who goes and who stays?

The top person must be totally trustworthy and competent. This individual should have the power to fire anyone at his or her will. Put everyone in the organization on one year probation allowing termination at the will of the Director. One year should give the Director time to sort it all out, flatten the organization, and dump the middle managers that have been obstructions. If the Director cannot be given the power to perform such a restructuring, the ATM is done, through,

finished. Privatization will be the only alternative. In that case, the above discussion still remains totally relevant.

SUMMARY

Government's role is to provide adequate transportation infrastructure to foster commerce and public access to services. The entire road and highway system of Puerto Rico is provided for these same purposes. The road is not a profit center; it is not a business; and it does not make money. The ferry service required to sustain our island falls into this same category. Puerto Rico receives millions of dollars per year from the Federal Transportation Administration to pay for infrastructure and equipment. There is NO EXCUSE for money issues to be the cause of our dismal service.

The entire ferry system (ATM) is now, and has been, so totally mismanaged that it has almost single-handedly crushed the economy of Vieques and is dashing the hopes for our future. The ATM demonstrates an appalling lack competence, as well as a lack of sensitivity and concern for the wellbeing of thousands of Puerto Ricans. It is hard to believe that the past operation of the system was anything less than an attempt to punish Vieques for something, or an indication of some criminal scheme by ATM officials. We are in a period of dire fiscal constraints, but ***this issue is a catastrophe for our community and deserves both priority attention and action.***

If government can't do the job, quit! Give the federal subsidy to private companies who bid the routes instead of using ***control of the ports to restrain trade and prevent private companies from entering the market.***

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