

MAKING THE MOST OF THE SHORT ROUTE

The ferry system appears to be in a state of semi-predictable chaos as the transition from the traditional route in Fajardo lurches spasmodically into the “medium” route from Ceiba to Isabel II. Under pressure from the Governor demanding that certain things happen by certain dates, the move to the Ceiba facilities was clearly premature: the infrastructure is not complete. Nonetheless, there is some comfort in seeing that the new Director of the ATM, Juan Maldonado, is attempting to make the right things happen to clean up the mess and get the work-in-progress of the short route on track.

Tuesday afternoon, a meeting purportedly intended to be an informative presentation of the plans for the short route turned into a four hour plus opportunity for residents to relate their concerns to the Mayor and the Director. While many good points were raised identifying problematic issues in need of corrections and solutions, the expectations of most others desirous of learning what the plans for the near future might be were unmet.

For those who were unable to attend the meeting, allow me to hit a few points from there and a follow-up conversation the next day.

The New Director

Sr. Maldonado took his position as the head of the ATM the 29th of August. He is an attorney with legal experience working with the Tren Urbano and Metropolitan Bus Authority, as well as the Asociacion de Empleados de Gobierno de Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rico House of Representatives, and the Senate of Puerto Rico. I have had discussions with previous directors of the ATM and DTOP, and this man is different. Promises made in the past by others have often been offered with good, but naïve, intentions. Funding for the ATM wasn't forthcoming, dreams were unfulfilled, and we residents were left frustrated. The differences that I perceive here are:

1. Maldonado is humbler and more willing to listen than some of his predecessors. He seems to recognize that there is much to learn and is fully accepting responsibility for his decisions.
2. He definitely seems smart and realizes that many of the initial plans and implementations will need to be modified or eliminated as the results are analyzed. The moves to the short route, and the use of private resources, require a new paradigm for the organization, and these will present new challenges and a formidable learning curve. **He intends to be a catalyst for change!**
3. He is experienced in dealing with labor-management relations.
4. He recognizes that they have an excellent chance of receiving Federal funding of a type not before utilized by the ATM. Heretofore, there was little effort to tap into Federal grants. It is my understanding from previous discussions with the FTA (Federal Transportation Administration) that funding through them had been in decline, ostensibly due to noncompliance of some sort. Currently, there are staggering amounts of second wave grant opportunities available for those who are eligible and submit the proper forms and other information. He's bringing a consultant on board to apply for and secure applicable grants.
5. He has a close, personal connection with Vieques.

The Short Term Plan

The immediate plan for the Rompeolas should be considered fluid to the extent that they know there will be issues to resolve requiring changes. They are looking for feedback from their customers.

To describe the new system, we can take an old fashion, in your mind, virtual tour. Looking at the attached terminal drawing as a reference, when coming from the east, three choices are applicable:

- Enter the parking lot entrance and stay to the right if you are bringing a vehicle to the cargo ferry. The staging area is right there.
- Enter the parking lot entrance and turn left to park if you are a passenger. There are 160 spaces with 7 ADA and 15 employee slots.
- Proceed passed the parking entrance and turn right on the pier road with another right to use the drop-off lane.

Walk to the terminal to buy tickets and await (in a seating area accommodating 230 on concrete benches) one of 5 trolleys operated by the ATM to transport you to the boat. There are toilet facilities and a breast-feeding area. The ticket windows include an ADA compatible station.

The passenger ferry is scheduled to utilize the port dock at the very end of the pier as envisioned years ago. The cargo ferries will back into the ramps located $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile out the pier. There are two ramps for the different boats, and each is somewhat adjustable in height. Passengers choosing to ride these ferries will need to walk the ramp.

A gate for security is currently planned to be installed about half way out the pier. Its purpose is to comply with Federal mandates administered by the USCG. Sr. Maldonado intends to meet with the Coast Guard to determine if a significantly lesser area can be fenced that would allow resident access to a greater area of the pier.

The Long Range Plan

The ultimate goal of the Governor and the Director is to have a PPP (Public Private Partnership) operating the ferry services. To that end, the ATM issued an RFQ (request for qualifications) to solicit interested potential bidders in June of this year. According to published reports, five respondents were deemed qualified to receive the opportunity to bid the RFP, which is due out soon. The competitors were identified as: Balearia Caribbean, HMS Ferries, Priority Roro Services, Puerto Rico Fast Ferries, and Seastreak.

In reviewing the RFQ, one can see that the intent is to give the private contractor a fixed price (with incentives) to operate specified routes and schedules. As presented, the ticket prices will not determine the operator's income because the monies will in effect go to the ATM, and the contractor will be paid by the ATM at the rate of the contract. In other words, the government is still subsidizing the system to make up the shortfalls from ticket sales – regardless of the pricing. If ticket prices go up, the operator does not earn an extra dime. The RFP will become public at some point after the bidders are informed, and we can then verify the specifics.

Issues for Action

Since the ATM plans are NOT set in cured concrete (literally or figuratively) at this point, we can focus attention on critical areas and might still have an impact on the outcomes. The following are my thoughts for your consideration and comments. Ideas and concerns that you have should also be expressed to the ATM Director:

<http://www2.pr.gov/Directorios/Pages/InfoAgencia.aspx?PRIFA=178>

Boats Serving Vieques. Running both passenger and cargo ferries requires two crews, more trips, and is **both expensive and inefficient**. Therefore, it is imperative for Vieques to use boats suitable to carry cars and trucks as well as comfortably transporting passengers. Typically, these will be slower than the high-speed passenger catamarans, but the distance is so reduced that the travel time differences will be minimal. These boats can also have outside seating, salon areas, and other amenities.

Abandonment of Passenger Terminal Use. If the only boats serving Vieques are then combinations with cargo, the dock at the end of the pier is unsuitable and **no longer necessary** for the ATM. It is understandable that one may want to use the facility as it was once intended, but the situation has changed in the last 15 years. As our island has evolved, the ATM solution creates a couple of problems that are very detrimental in the hearts and minds of residents:

- Two species of turtles and a rare coral under the pier are endangered by ferry operations, and no current environmental impact report has been performed for this area and use.
- Swimming, snorkeling, and SCUBA diving activities are said to be the best on the island under the pier, and with the current plan, they would be prohibited.
- Fishing from the dock and the pier is a popular resident pastime that would be dramatically restricted. Plans for an additional fishing dock have been discussed.

Cargo Ramp Development. The cargo ramp area should be modified to accommodate passengers and simultaneously protect the docked and docking boats from strong lateral currents. Passengers on the cargo boats now must walk the auto ramps to embark or disembark. This is difficult for some and really awkward in the rain and wind. Safety is an issue. A permanent finger pier perpendicular to the mile-long pier can be constructed to protect the boats and the passengers (see the attached drawing). If two slips for docking are utilized, then two finger piers should be constructed.

The cross currents can be significant at times, and several of the boats do not have bow thrusters or adequate differential thrust to safely hold the boats properly aligned. This will pose operational problems on occasion that will lead to service interruptions.

Pier Access & Security. The tentative plan to place a security gate mid pier is like using a nuke to dig fence posts. If one examines the ports of Culebra, Vieques, and Fajardo, he/she will find that a simple fence protecting the actual embarkation area is all that is required. I don't believe it is necessary for the government to continue taking more areas and declaring them off limits.

Ferry Schedule. As the Director is well aware and intends to address, the biggest issue for the ferry service is capacity. Increasing our load factors is not the issue, it's having more boats scheduled. Many government officials have used existing ferry utilization figures for small

periods of time and extrapolated into erroneous generalizations. When you have a service which is constrained, unpredictable, difficult to use, and unreliable, you tend to use that service ONLY if you absolutely must. Ridership figures are, therefore, far less than actual demand would be on a reliable, unconstrained system.

In our current situation, we no longer have two early boats (6:00 and 6:30), but we have a 10:00PM boat. Our demand to go to Ceiba is primarily early morning. The only reason anyone takes the 10:00PM boat is because they must be on the main island the next day, and they can't rely on getting an early ferry the following morning. The Director explained that it's a crew problem: they have only one Vieques based crew. *If your major concern is employees' convenience, you make the customer conform to the ATM needs. If your major concern is customer service, you station your crews where they need to be to provide that service.*

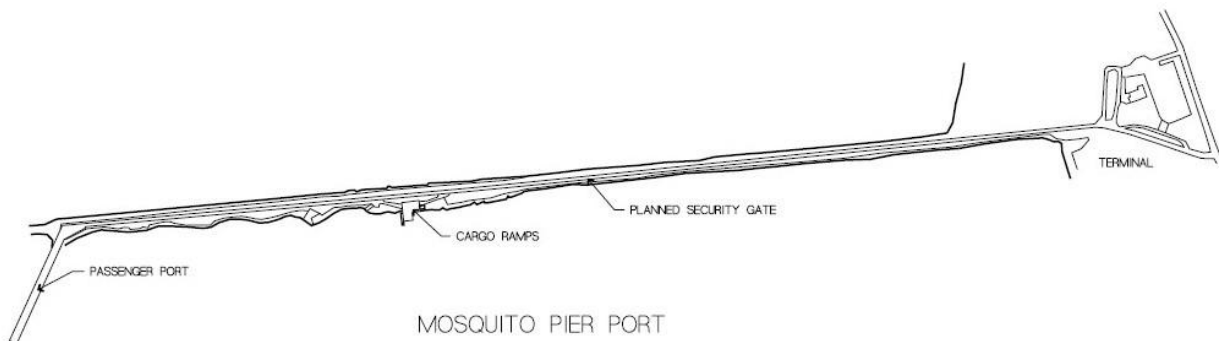
Communications. Keeping the public informed of pertinent issues is a key piece of customer service that is lacking at every level of government in Puerto Rico. When operating a transportation network, it is critical. The resources required to inform are minimal these days, but management must take responsibility for thorough, ongoing information dissemination, period. Published channels to contact the ATM must be established and work. Follow-up is essential.

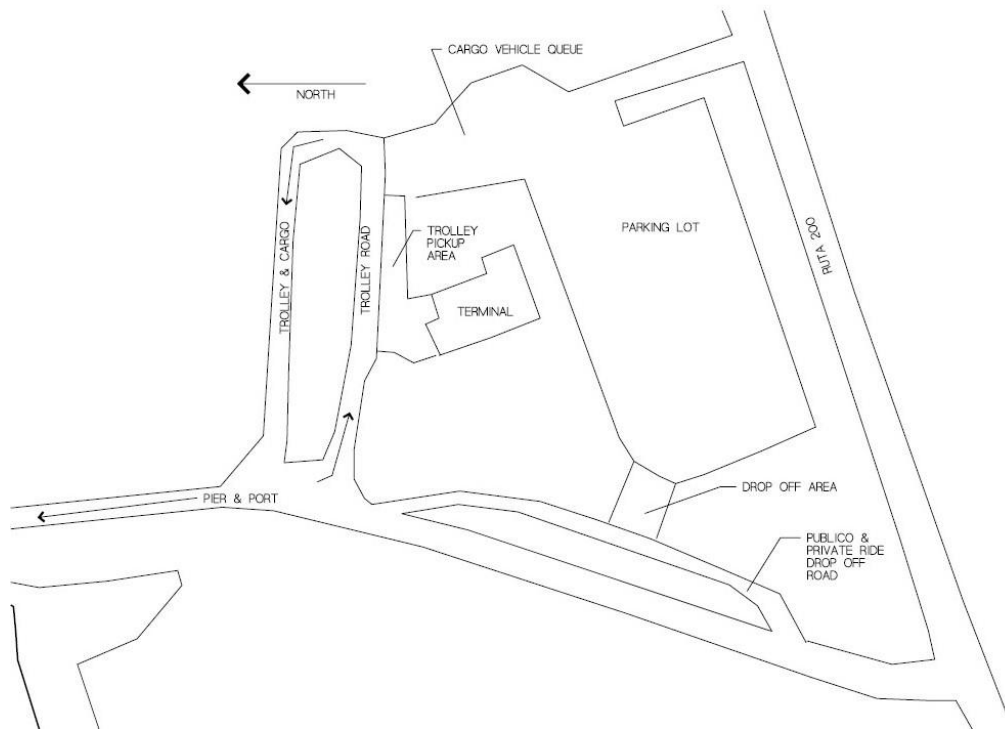
Adequate and reliable cell service is essential for passengers at both ports. Applying a little government pressure to the cell phone companies to ensure adequate coverage will help eliminate current reception dead spots. Additionally, though far more complex, telephone and internet ticketing must be available. Ticket sales and internet should also be offered while on the boats.

Summary

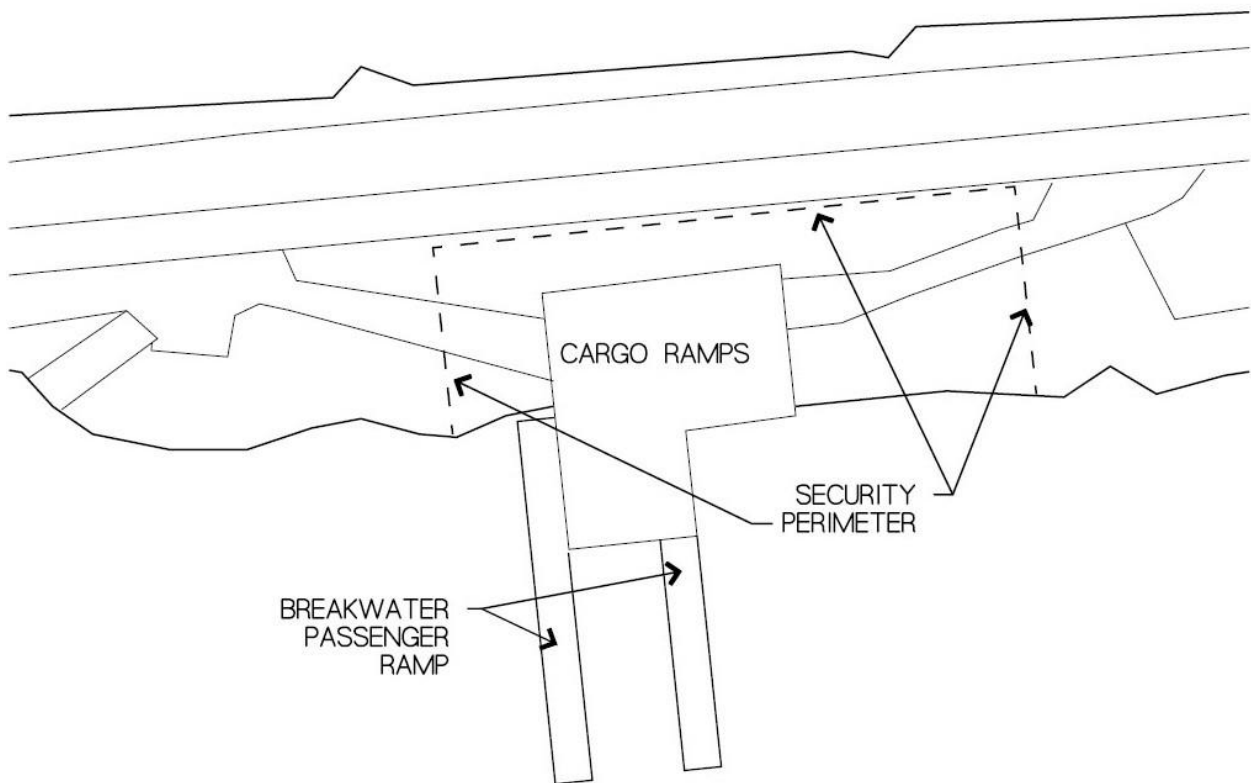
Although there have been (and will continue to be) glitches, progress is being made. Change is disruptive, and not everything is favorable to everyone. It takes a bit of time for the dust to settle. One good thing about the transition period is that competent managers are sensitive to the feedback they receive while it is still easy to make adjustments and corrections.

My belief is that polite and thoughtful critique of the operation sent to Juan Maldonado will be welcomed and considered. It is also my opinion that he is the right man for this job at this time. We will see soon if my intuition is on the mark or not. Either way, as you use the system, be patient and let him know what you think about it.





TERMINAL



PROPOSED CARGO/PASSENGER PORT MID PIER