

# CONFIDENTIAL DRAFT: POWER TO THE PEOPLE

I'd like to bring you up to speed with what has transpired over the last several months and shine some light on how things have evolved. While there are always elements of luck, serendipity, and risk associated with efforts and movements of this kind, knowing what you want, being prepared, treating everyone with respect, and remaining flexible significantly improve your chances of obtaining a positive outcome. That has certainly been the case thus far with the repowering of Vieques.

The point of this discussion is two-fold: First, to illustrate how the concerted efforts of residents and their networks served to accomplish potential improvements in sustainable, independent power for Vieques that were mere pipe dreams before Maria; and second, to suggest how others may become involved in similar projects of interest and passion to improve the living conditions and future for our citizens.

## Electrical Power Initiative

The informal power group was begun by Jim Trevorrow and Amanda Meyers and initially focused on rapid restoration. A visual database was created to place Google Maps markers on houses without power. With this data, PREPA's claims of connections were discredited, and eventually, power company managers came to work together with Jim and Amanda to verify that neighborhoods and individual homes were wired. The couple earned their credibility, their place at the table, and their influence. Their impressive success in working together provided interested and informed Vieques citizens liaison with PREPA, USACE, FEMA, and DOE.

Simultaneously with the restoration activities, residents (guided by Jim and Amanda) concerned about the future of power for Vieques were reaching out to numerous political and industry figures to request the creation of a sustainable and resilient electrical system. Everyone was aware the cables supplying power to us from Naguabo were cut. Few people knew that:

- The existing cables were already at the end of lifespan, although former AEE employees had warned of this over ten years ago
- Reconnection in Naguabo faced several other structural and technical challenges
- The Punta Arenas facility has been suffering erosion problems and is in poor shape
- Distribution lines from Punta Arenas are down and new lines would be required to run through the lagoons of the Fish & Wildlife Reserve; this requires new roads in addition to studies, poles, and the fact that it would be vulnerable to future storms

Consensus among funding authorities concluded that restoration of the former cable system was neither sustainable nor cost effective, so other options were investigated. The tethering of Vieques and Culebra to the Big Island was still being considered even though it left us vulnerable to similar failures in the future. The then current thought had been a triangular set running from the Ceiba area to the Mosquito Pier area, and a second cable from Ceiba to Culebra. The existing cable from Vieques to Culebra was not severely damaged and would remain. The time to prepare the studies, gain approvals, manufacture the cable, and install everything was approximately 4 years. Again, efforts by local residents arose to intercede by providing analysis (to a network of contacts) that demonstrated superior alternatives.

A decentralized solar/battery solution with backup diesel generators was considered to be less expensive than the cable connection and take much less time to bring up and running. Operating on the existing or replacement generators would require over \$120,000/week in fuel (over \$25,000,000 in four years) and rely extensively on the totally unreliable ferry system.

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Furthermore, dependence on the main island generation and transmission did not improve our resiliency one bit over the past situation. FEMA understood our position and on their own offered a paid solution to PREPA to completely replace the grid in Vieques to Rural Utility Service (RUS) standards like the rest of the US. Incomprehensibly, PREPA initially declined. Upon bringing the new CEO, Walter Higgins, on board, things changed.

Higgins saw the value of making Vieques-Culebra a showcase of the kind of systems that should be implemented throughout PR. Expanding our network and reaching out to the US Senate, private citizens living in Vieques (including Mark Martin Bras and Terzah Poe) were able to make an impact that emerged during the Senate hearing in early May. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, Chair of the Senate Energy Committee, explained to all that Vieques would make an excellent pilot project of sustainable energy. When Higgins returned from Washington, he was invited to visit Vieques by local homeowners Bob and Terzah Poe. Bob spent years running the Alaska Energy Authority and knows power. Meetings were set up with the Municipio and the COE so that Walter could present his plan and receive feedback from the community. The formalization of the plan was announced and reported by the NY Times during the last week of May. Construction is reportedly scheduled to begin around Labor Day.

Assuming the project is implemented successfully, and *even done-deals can unravel*, the next phase (perhaps 4 or 5 years out) for Vieques could be to form a municipal or public cooperative to acquire and run the local utility:

PREPA is to be privatized according to the Governor. The Vieques system will continue to be isolated from the main island and will probably be offered for sale as an independent piece. The FEMA investment will be large and cannot be transferred to a private entity without repayment of the funds. A citizen or municipality owned cooperative would qualify for a cost-free transfer of assets making the startup cost of the coop very affordable.

Establishing a utility cooperative is common, straightforward, and supported by the US government. There are around 1,000 utility related coops in the States.

[For more information, check out the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives webpage: <http://reic.uwcc.wisc.edu/electric/> ]

In the case of Vieques, like most other communities, existing local expertise is inadequate to manage and operate a utility, so contractors are typically selected to run the grid and the generation systems day-to-day. A board of directors is elected by the members to oversee the contractors, establish and maintain the standards of all aspects of the utility, and ensure the will of the customers is being met. Experts are normally hired to assist from time to time.

## The Process for Other Improvements

We have many other issues that demand our attention, vision, and efforts. But, how to proceed? What can a resident or other interested party do? The standard approach has been for the government to create and implement laws, rules, policies, and programs without stakeholder involvement. After the fact, the activists within the community complain, demand, and protest. Nothing significant typically happens.

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Nobody is going to offer us a seat at the table for making decisions: we must crash the party. We have to be proactive. Issues that need to be addressed are abundant, and for starters, include:

- Economic development
- Educational achievement
- Energy sustainability, resilience, and emergency response
- Healthcare services
- Recycling and waste treatment
- Security and justice
- Transportation to the main island

Most residents are concerned about most issues, but few people have the time, experience, knowledge, and energy to focus on more than one or two topics. Consequently, people should prioritize and specialize according to their passions. Choose the most important area and go for it. Here's what that entails:

- Do your homework – research our current situation and solutions that others have used for similar purposes; educate yourself. Recognize there is a lot you don't know.
- Formulate a vision that satisfies the needs of the community for the future.
- Always be prepared to pitch your plan any time the opportunity is presented to you – the most effective times can often be on chance encounters – so be ready.
- Network with others who are also concerned about the issue and get their opinions.
- Revise the vision as appropriate based upon the feedback received.
- Expand the network to include government, funding sources, professionals, and people of influence on the main island and anywhere else that the expertise may reside. Join news groups, go to conferences, attend public meetings....
- Create a tactical plan to effectively utilize the network to steer action toward the goals of the group.
- Always remember to keep the welfare of Vieques first and foremost realizing that we have no legal authority to make decisions, but we can educate, advocate, and assist.
- Recognize that compromises must be made and flexibility is necessary.
- Be willing to reevaluate issues in light of new information.
- Be honest and respectful to all regardless of how they treat you.
- Not every effort will bear fruit. Not all understandings will become reality. Keep working. Press ahead. Learn from the failures. Don't quit.
- **Let your passion drive the process, but let your intelligence inform your communications.**

If you want to have input into the solutions, you can't stand on the sidelines – you must take action. If we can form groups or committees with common interests to attack the various issues, we can make a huge difference. This is NOT top down organization but bottom up. It's YOU and your neighbors who expand the network as described above. It's focus and drive to stick with the issue until resolution. It's obtaining influence where none was obvious or available before. It's asking for help from others who you suspect might be able to assist.

You CAN do this! And you must.