

## REPLACING THE ATM FERRY SERVICE

Over the last 13 years, I have written numerous articles and letters to US and Puerto Rican agencies and newspaper editors describing how the ATM systematically chokes commerce in Vieques through inadequate cargo service and self-serving operational policies that favor Fajardo employees and businesses over their customers. I have emphasized that Culebra, with a population one fourth the size of ours, has almost the exact same cargo service as we are allocated. Look at the schedules to see the intentional, persistent inequities. Nothing changes.

The PR Tourism Company taxes us and uses our beaches to attract tourists to Puerto Rico, but it appears to be a bait and switch to get people to come to San Juan and other venues because it is made so difficult to visit our island. Our local airlines are horribly overpriced and offer inadequate scheduling. The ferry terminal in Fajardo is a cross between a refugee camp and a third world ghetto – and that was before the hurricanes!

Business development is a pipe dream for islanders given that business restoration is impossible due to cargo ferry constraints. Is it reasonable that:

- Residents can't make a reservation for a car or truck?
- One can't purchase a round-trip cargo ticket?
- One can't call to secure passage and must visit the terminal of departure in person?
- Standby lines begin forming at 10:00 PM for a 6:00 AM one-way trip?

For over 15 years we have been promised better service and the implementation of the short route. Every administration agrees it will cost less to run more boats utilizing Roosevelt Roads and Mosquito Pier. Everyone agrees that bringing fuel and other heavy trucks across the weakened bridge next to the Vieques ferry dock is illegal and dangerous. We all know the cost to fix the Fajardo terminal is far greater than the cost to provide the required improvements for the short route. But, nothing changes.

Our plight is obviously intended because fixing it is so technically easy. This is not rocket science; it's politics. We are treated as inmates, not taken seriously, and are denied power to combat the paternal, self-serving masters of Puerto Rico. We are a colony of a colony.

## THE PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS

There are two key measures into which all evaluations of the ferry service fall: quantity and quality. The existing service is an absolute failure in both aspects.

### Quality: The Ports

The Fajardo port is (and has been for decades) totally inappropriate:

- The port is too shallow and causes severe maintenance problems
- The maneuvering space, parking, and traffic problems cause **huge** delays

## REPLACING THE ATM FERRY SERVICE

- Security and law enforcement activities in cramped quarters cause **huge** delays
- Rebuilding the terminal and dredging the dock area will cost \$20M or more
- No plan is afoot to improve the surface street traffic flow

The Vieques port has outlived its safe usefulness:

- The port is too shallow and causes severe maintenance problems
- The maneuvering space, parking, and traffic problems cause huge delays
- Travelers park on surface streets and reduce business parking in town
- **The bridge adjacent to the dock which allows passage to the rest of the island has been tested and has a 15-ton safety limit; the trucks that must cross this bridge weigh up to 3 times this limit; it is illegal and unsafe**
- Rebuilding the terminal, dredging the dock area, and rebuilding the bridge exceed \$10M
- No plan is afoot to improve the surface street traffic flow or parking

### **Quality: The Route**

As identified in the Draft RFQ, the distance from Mosquito Pier to RR is less than half that from Isabel Segunda to Fajardo and presents essentially no change for Culebra. All routes into Isabel Segunda and Fajardo should be eliminated for the reasons stated above alone. Because the amount of time and fuel saved is so significant, it makes no sense to operate multiple routes. The wave action is typically less intense, safer, and more comfortable than the longer route. **The short route is Ceiba – Mosquito Pier NOT Isabel Segunda.**

Moving the ATM operations to Mosquito Pier and Roosevelt Roads will save an enormous amount of time and money, and it will enable increased cargo service to Vieques at no additional cost. The upfront funds of improving the facilities for the short route are less than the costs of repair/remodel/dredging (Fajardo & Vieques) and building a new truck bridge at the Vieques dock.

### **Quality: Boats - Configuration**

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

1. The fleet should consist of similar boats, having most if not all system components identical.
2. The preferred boats are drive-through for rapid loading and unloading.
3. All boats should be combination passenger and cargo. Passengers would load simultaneously but 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 ticketing area, and a small canteen. The restrooms should be plentiful, roomy and easily cleaned. The ticketing operation 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.
5. Boats should be large enough to accommodate the above requirements and plan for expansion. Passenger capacity of 350 and 35 vehicles should be absolute minimums. Deck capacities should allow for heavy trucks.

## REPLACING THE ATM FERRY SERVICE

6. The cabins should include both outside and inside (air conditioned) seating options. The outside space should include both covered and uncovered seating.
7. Each boat should have effective high capacity internet service available for passengers and administration. An AIS transponder for monitoring craft location is a must.
8. Ticket offices (onboard and onshore) require both internet and dedicated cell phones for reservations, payments, crew, and M&O (maintenance and operations) communications.

### **Quality: Facilities**

The most essential land side facility is the loading dock with required modifications (probably including hydraulic ramps). Passenger loading should be through the sides. By way of an illustration, the ramp in the center of Mosquito Pier has only a couple of pilings used to hold the boats “straight”. A covered ramp combined with a wind break (for passengers and the ferry itself) needs to be constructed. Other infrastructure improvements will be dictated by the USCG. The existing terminal at the end of the pier should not be considered for any ferry operations.

Spacious queuing areas for loading should be provided for cars and trucks that do not conflict with disembarking vehicles or passengers. Parking areas should be provided for passengers not bringing vehicles. On Mosquito Pier the current road side parking would continue to be used but should be formalized. Publico parking could be on the road side across from the dock and bus drop-off could be on the dock side of the road. Waiting areas for individual pickup should be north of the dock on the west side of the road. (*See the attached schematic design of the area near the center of the Rompeolas shown below.*) The inappropriate existing parking area at the entrance to the pier should not be considered for commuter parking.

Equivalent accommodation at RR is required with sufficient space to allow easy and uncomplicated management of Culebra and Vieques arrivals and departures. Additionally, the route from the ferry dock to the highway (to Humacao and/or Fajardo) should be streamlined, and trucks should not be run all over Ceiba.

Waiting terminals and commercial concessions need not be constructed initially but should be planned for the future. Portable toilets might be used immediately. Given more rapid and frequent service, once the boat is docked and emptied, passengers could embark and use the onboard salon, ticket office, and/or restrooms in lieu of a “terminal”. Any exterior facilities should be as minimal as possible, primarily providing weather protection. Equipment maintenance, fueling, cleanout, and support should be in Ceiba.

### **Quantity: Scheduled Service**

The scheduled service to and from Vieques is totally inadequate:

*Until 2010 or so, Vieques had 15 ATM cargo ferries allocated to service the island per week, which equated to about 320 vehicles. During the ferry maintenance crisis at that time period resulting in the loss of several boats, the PR Fast Ferry was hired to augment the service with their own boats and crews. Because the passenger ferries were out of service, the ATM used cargo ferries (with limited passenger space) for all Vieques runs. Although meeting schedules was still most often impossible, the seven ATM round trips a day (4 each on weekends) were all cargo vessels and brought the intended total ATM cargo trips per week to a total of 43 – almost three times the normal allotment - and with a far more useful range of departure times. The 15 supplemental trips by PRFF resulted in just under 60 roundtrips per week – almost four times*

## REPLACING THE ATM FERRY SERVICE

*the vehicle capacity of previous years and about twice as many as currently scheduled. Assuming that the boats all ran, we had the capacity to move 1200 vehicles. Many local ATM personnel resented the PRFF and often would not allow reservations, forcing many to waste time going standby. On many occasions agents refused to sell tickets while the boats had space available and were forced to leave half empty. Despite this subversion, the boats tripled the cargo volume to an estimated 800 vehicles. The point here being that there is significantly more demand at the current horrible level of service than is being met. With a more reliable, better scheduled service, the pent-up demand could fund a significant increase in service.*

The easier and more pleasant it is to reach Vieques, the more tourists will come and the greater the development of our economy. The more people that come, the more demand for services. The more services provided, the more people come, and the demand for the ferry increases. To support the additional services, we must have increased cargo capacity.

### **Action: New System**

We must start all over from scratch. A new entity must be formed with a new mission, new goals, and a new plan that are aligned with the needs and intentions of the customers to be served. Former employees deemed worthy should be hired, but within the context and policies of the new culture and the new organization.

Passengers, whether residents, tourists, or business representatives must be treated with respect; and that not only means “being nice”, but requires good communications, fair treatment, and an adequate level of service to meet the communities’ needs.

The mission statement should read something like this:

*The purpose of the Island Ferry Service is to provide safe, convenient, reliable, economical, and pleasant transport for passengers, vehicles, and cargo between Vieques (Mosquito Pier), Culebra, and the Roosevelt Roads on a schedule that accommodates the needs of the communities and their guests for personal needs, healthcare access, business operations, and economic development.*

The structure of the new ferry system should be based on a User Co-op, Vieques Municipality, or Vieques-Culebra owned and “controlled” entity. This would leave ownership of the operation in the hands of the public, although a private operator would be contracted to operate the system under strict guidelines and specifications. The options:

Plan A:

The actual cost of the contract could be fixed, and the Board of Directors of the public entity would set ticket prices and assume the risks with flexible backstopping by the government of PR.

Plan B:

The PR subsidy could be fixed, and the operator could bid the service based upon that subsidy. PR support should begin initially at approximately the current level of \$20M per year. Ticket prices could be adjusted over a period of one or two years to determine demand and optimum pricing for the benefit of the islands.

## REPLACING THE ATM FERRY SERVICE

### RFP

Any successful form of ownership and operational control must reflect an understanding that the businesses submitting bids do not intend to absorb the financial and personnel problems of the ATM. They are not going to assume the ATM risks, nor are they going to buy a “pig in the poke”.

In order to have a successful contract bidding event, the participants need to know that they will be treated fairly, protected from physical and legal sabotage, and free to run a solid business now and in the future. They must trust that they are not being set up and that contractual obligations will be met.

The PR government knows that ferry systems providing basic services to residents don't pay for themselves and must be subsidized – just like state highways, roads, mass transit, etc. These facts are reality. If Puerto Rico determines it can't afford to (or won't) provide this necessary basic service, it should officially state that Vieques and Culebra are on their own.

Initial minimum schedule example:

<u>Depart Vieques</u>	<u>Depart Roosevelt Roads</u>
5:00 AM	6:00 AM (not on Sunday)
7:00 AM	9:00 AM
10:00 AM	12:00 PM
1:00 PM	3:00 PM
4:00 PM	5:00 PM
7:00 PM	8:00 PM

Initial pricing structure with added discounts as deemed necessary:

<u>Pricing (Round Trips)</u>	<u>1 Ride</u>	<u>Vieques Resident (If legal)</u>	<u>10 Ride</u>
Passenger	25	15	100
Car & Driver	75	45	350
Small Truck & Driver	125	75	600
Large Truck & Driver	300		
Semi-Truck & Driver	500		
Fuel Truck & Driver	750		

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North end