

Energy transition



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

I welcomed the announcement that the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (Prepa) is moving from petroleum to natural gas as a transition to renewable sources. Prepa is already contracting wind, solar and waste-to-energy projects, but renewable sources as a whole

are years away from economic viability or generational capabilities responsive to the demand on our island. So the sensible move—a no-brainer, really—is to go to natural gas while pursuing the development of renewable sources in a parallel course with appropriate timing.

I explored natural gas during my last term as governor, but at that time I could not bring Prepa around. Times have changed, the price of oil has risen, our consumers are hurting, and energy costs have soared for manufacturing and commercial purposes, dragging down our competitiveness.

The implementation of this shift from petroleum to natural gas is a major initiative of the Fortuño administration. It will not only lower consumers' energy bills and improve the quality of the air we breathe, but will also attend to a nagging factor in cost analyses by prospective investors in Puerto Rico: the high cost of energy (twice as much as some states of the Union). Investment, particularly in manufacturing—yes, still manufacturing—is the principal source of job creation that we need to get on with our economic development. The naysayers are already active against it. Some are embedded in the media, others in associations and still others in the communities in the different municipalities that the pipeline must cross to bring the gas to the power stations of the northern coast of Puerto Rico. Torrents of demagoguery will flood the media, the bogeyman will turn up in the communities—fear, fear, fear—natural gas will morph into nerve gas, and apocalyptic predictions will abound. We have heard it all before.

Most of this opposition comes from the usual suspects—the Puerto Rican Independence Party included—to whatever course the governments—Popular Democratic Party or New Progressive Party—intend to pursue. Some of it comes from responsible individuals with legitimate concerns. The former must be ignored; nothing that can be said or done will satisfy them. The concerns of the latter must be analyzed on their merits and addressed, because government cannot pretend to have a monopoly on truth, knowledge or perfection.

The merits of a major project like this are debated in the court of public opinion. If left unattended, crude demagoguery will distort a project



essential to our well-being into a major issue that will be hard to manage at the end of the day. Political opportunists will be waiting at every turn of the road to ride the wave of public opinion. The government must educate the public as to the merits of this project at the grass-roots level and the macro level. It is evident that such an effort is being undertaken.

I do not find it legitimate to oppose this project because in the face of opposition to the pipeline that was to run from Peñuelas to Guayama, initiated by the previous administration, the current administration decided to use that pipeline to transport water. I would not have made that decision; other corrections to the project were possible. But that is no reason why anyone should oppose this project, particularly when Prepa has recognized the mistakes made in routing the Peñuelas-Guayama pipeline through communities that should have been better protected and has provided for significant separation of this pipeline from the neighboring communities.

The construction, installation and operation of infrastructure always entail some risks to the population. The risks must be assessed with precision and balanced against the benefits that the infrastructure, be it roads, ports, pipelines, electric lines or whatever, will bring to the country. As I mentioned at the beginning of this column, the economic and environmental benefits that natural gas will bring to Puerto Rico are substantial. How about the risks from the pipeline?

The National Transportation and Safety Board (NSTB) provides the following data for the year 2002:

Accidents on public roads/deaths	42,000
Accidents on planes, boats and trains/deaths	2,000
Accidents related to the transmission of natural gas/deaths	12

And that was in 2002. Since then, there have been significant advances in pipeline technology, including monitoring. The more recent statistics regarding the number of deaths and wounded in accidents related to natural gas pipelines are the following:

Year	Number of accidents	Deaths/wounded
2006	78	3/3
2007	75	2/7
2008	67	0/5
2009	60	0/7

Now these statistics are from the United States, where there are more than 217,000 miles of natural-gas pipelines on an interstate level and 89,000 at an intrastate level. That is 306,000 miles of natural pipelines at those levels all told. If we take into consideration that our pipeline will only be 91 miles long, we will quickly realize that the risks involved with this project are small, and that the benefits outweigh the risks by far.

This will not prevent the demagogues and irresponsible media from projecting horror stories to scare people off. One would wish that we could rise above this level of underdevelopment in our media and political discourse, that initiatives such as this one could receive serious discussion and nonpoliticized analysis. But that's the way the cookie crumbles in our tropical menagerie. My advice to the government: stay the course with this valuable initiative. ■

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-'76 and 1985-'92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-'67) and Senate president (1969-'72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusinesspr.com. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.