

The race for mayor in Ponce

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We have just passed Labor Day when the crescendo of political campaigns leading up to November begins in earnest. Political campaigns are exercises in communication. They communicate to voters the personal characteristics of the candidates, the stands their parties take, the platform and the message of the candidate. The message is structured by the dialectic of the campaign, the candidate's priorities, his or her strengths and the opponent's weaknesses.

The race for mayor in Ponce has just begun. It started with two press conferences, one by a group of New Progressive Party (NPP) candidates and the other by the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) incumbent Mayor Francisco Zayas Seijo, on the Port of the Américas. The NPP candidates, lead by Senate candidate Thomas Rivera Schatz, includes Dr. Mayita Meléndez, the NPP candidate for mayor. Mayor Zayas Seijo held the press conference for the PDP. Carlos R. Jirau, the candidate that broke away from the PDP and formed a new party didn't join the fray. He has assumed the role of a potential spoiler in this election.

The Port of the Américas is the centerpiece of the mayor's message in this campaign. The port represents the engine for economic development that Ponce has lacked since the old Commonwealth Oil Refining Corp. (Corco) and the petrochemical complex shut down three decades ago. The idea of the deep-water port originally was floated by the Rosselló administration. Rosselló first wanted to locate the port in Guayanilla; then he changed his mind and proposed that it should be located in Ceiba. The late Rafael "Churumba" Cordero—may he rest in peace—was the mayor of Ponce at the time Rosselló came up with the idea. Churumba had the studies that recommended Ponce as the proper location for the port. He opened fire on the Rosselló administration and a major political battle was fought between the NPP and the PDP over the location of the port. When Sila Calderón won the governorship, Churumba finally prevailed and Ponce was selected.

The press conference of the NPP leadership—which earlier had denied Ponce the deep-water port—was an exercise in political impudence. They intended to take the mayor to task on the port's state of development. They forget that the NPP had opposed the idea of establishing the port in Ponce and that the development of the port as proposed by Rosselló was to be financed by private investment. Both ideas turned out to be wrong; Ponce was the best alternative for locating the port and public investment was essential for the initial—and perhaps all—stages of development. They set back the project for over four years while the site was debated and the feasibility of private investment was explored.

At the present time, the container terminal for post-Panamax vessels is no more than six months away from becoming operational. The permitting process was completed. Dredging to a 50-foot depth also was completed. Six hundred acres were acquired for mitigation. Three piers were rehabilitated. The site for

value-added operations was acquired and is under development. An 18-acre area for containers to handle a capacity of 250,000 TEUs (20-foot equivalent units) has been made available. Two new, super, post-Panamax cranes and seven tire gantries have been ordered. An expansion to 500,000 TEUs is under way. Private operators are doing their due diligence to make their proposals for operating the port. The operators are key for the development of the port as a hub for value-added operations.

All this has been accomplished by the Port of the Américas under its able Executive Director Ramón Torres Morales and the oversight of the Port's board of directors, which the Ponce mayor is the principal party in interest, since the port belongs to the municipality.

Moving the process along hasn't been easy. Many difficulties—some serious—have had to be surmounted. But Ramón Torres and Mayor "Ico" Zayas have been up to the task and the fact that the container terminal for post-Panamax vessels is in the final stage before becoming operational is due to their efforts and their ability to handle the task.

So, it takes a lot of *chutzpah* for politicians who have done nothing to contribute to the development of the port and who belong to the party that didn't want the port to be in Ponce, to come to this city to open a campaign with baseless accusations as to procrastination regarding the development of the port.

The race for mayor in Ponce will hinge on the qualifications between the PDP and NPP candidates to administer the municipality and the port of Ponce now being developed under a memorandum of understanding with the Port of the Américas. The electorate will be wary in putting the complex handling of these matters in the hands of Dr. Meléndez, a dentist with no public or private administrative experience.

When "Ico" Zayas came to the office of mayor of Ponce, he had been a municipal legislator and had spent 16 years as a member of the Commonwealth House of Representatives, the last four as chairman of the House Treasury Committee, which draws up the Commonwealth's budget. This chairmanship is a privileged position from which to get to know the operations of all government agencies and the financing of all government projects. If "Ico" Zayas had gone directly from his office as a veterinarian to the office as mayor of Ponce, the Port of the Américas wouldn't be where it is today.

The NPP candidate's lack of experience with public administration also shows up regarding Law 212 and the rehabilitation of Ponce's urban center. The law provides tax incentives for private projects—new construction or rehabilitation—in the town center. The bulk of private projects going on in Ponce are Law 212 projects. Dr. Meléndez doesn't even mention the law in her platform. I am sure she isn't against the law; my impression is that she isn't aware of its importance for stimulating construction, creating jobs and rehabilitating the town center. This is the problem when a candidate lacks experience in handling public affairs.

A careful analysis of the qualification of the candidates in the Ponce race, and the ongoing projects for the economic development of the city, should result in a solid majority—of both *populares* and new progressives—in favor of “Ico” Zayas so he can finish the task he has set out to do for Ponce.

