

Aguada's Discovery Bay Resort & Marina awaits green light

Project's builders say the end of permitting process is in sight
Last significant economic activity in municipality generated by sugar cane

BY GABRIEL PARRA BLESSING

Aguada has historically been one of the most impoverished municipalities in Puerto Rico, mirroring a condition that characterizes much of the northwest region of the island including the towns of Aguadilla, Isabela and Moca. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 55.6% of families in Aguada found themselves struggling below the poverty level in 1999. Median family income in Aguada was \$12,869 that year, nearly 30% less than the Puerto Rico median, and a full 70% of Aguada's children between the ages of 5 and 17 were living below the poverty level.

Meanwhile, the construction of a project which, its proponents argue, would add more than 1,500 direct, indirect and induced jobs to the region has been waiting since 1999 to obtain the necessary permits that would allow it to proceed.

Tommy Cordero, president of Cordeco Northwest Corp., said the Discovery Bay Resort & Marina will establish in Aguada one of the largest tourism and residential projects on the island. He insisted that for a municipality where fewer than 10,000 of the citizens were employed in 1999, and whose last significant economic activity was generated by the sugar cane industry half a century ago, the economic impact of such a project would be nothing short of transformational.

"Over a period that should last between eight and 15 years, depending on the overall state of the economy, we hope to build 160 hotel rooms, 170-to-270 condohotel and timeshare units, a 500-boat marina and between 550 and 650 residences," Cordeco's president said, adding investment for the project should be at least \$200 million and could reach as



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The Discovery Bay Resort & Marina would generate up to 1,500 jobs in a region where sugarcane farming was the last significant source of employment.

high as \$250 million. Cordero said he hopes to build a world-class nautical tourism destination to rival those already in place in the Dominican Republic (Cap Cana, Atlantica and Casa de Campo), Mexico (Los Cabos) and Hawaii (Kō Olina), while attending to the need for additional marinas on the west coast of the island. "While there are docking spaces for 3,000 boats on the east coast, between Ponce and Arecibo we only have 300 available spaces," Cordero commented, adding that the marina will include 270 dry-stack spaces.

According to Cordero, not only the mayor of Aguada, but those of surrounding Aguadilla, Rincón, Isabela and Moca are anxiously awaiting the start of a project that

promises to generate many millions of dollars for their respective economies over the years. He said he hopes to attract a major flag to operate the project—he mentioned Wyndham, Sheraton, Hilton and Marriott as possible choices—to bring Discovery Bay "the international recognition it deserves." He also indicated Cordeco has commissioned Edward D. Stone & Associates (EDSA)—famous for their work on the Ritz Carlton and El Conquistador in Puerto Rico and Atlantis in the Bahamas—as planners and designers of the project, as well as Moffatt & Nichol for coastal and breakwater design.

Nevertheless, environmental groups such as the Aguada Citizens

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for Environmental Conservation (Capca by its Spanish acronym) maintain the Discovery Bay project would adversely impact the area's historic, agricultural and ecological values. They point to the ruins of the Ermita de Espinal—reportedly the first church built in Puerto Rico—adjacent to the Discovery Bay's proposed site. Capca officials maintain pre-Columbian and colonial artifacts of "high historic value" have been found nearby, but Cordero said Puerto Rico Institute of Culture archeologists whom the company invited to inspect the proposed site have found none.

Moreover, environmentalists maintain the flooding required to create the inland marina would "salinate" adjacent lands, rendering them useless for agricultural purposes. However, the 2000 Census found that only about 1% of Aguada's employed population—94 individuals—held farming, fishing and forestry jobs in 1999, while the last time the area had any significant farming activity was several decades ago. Cordero said extensive hydrogeological studies in the area undertaken by experts in the field found a significant underground flow of fresh water from the mountains to the ocean, "a fact that renders the salinization argument utterly invalid."

Cordeco has proposed building two dams to remove part of the resort's proposed location from its current designation by the Planning Board as a flood-prone area, which would also alleviate the surrounding area's susceptibility to flooding.

Also, Cordeco said the navigation channel created by the inland marina would "dewater" any farming areas currently prone to flooding, which contrary to Capca's assertions, would actually encourage, rather than hinder, farming activity in the area. ■