

RAMON LUIS RIVERA CRUZ

The significance of vision and leadership in promoting social awareness and collective power guiding environmental sound and sensitive interventions

“Social awareness is vital and necessary to Collective Power. Environmental accountability and learning are only possible through the acknowledgement and valorization of past experiences, record keeping and intense usage of information and technology. When these elements are present the vital links between humanity, natural and constructed environments are understood and caring for these become possible”.

Ramón Luis Rivera Cruz

In recent years Bayamón, through the leadership of Mayor Ramón Luis Rivera Cruz, has adopted Sustainable Development and Smart Growth policies that guide projects and citizen interaction with its ecosystem.

Ramón Luis Rivera has always been concerned of the fact that Puerto Rico’s urban development has followed a model that has not considered enough the impact of actions on the environment. Our delicate island-ecosystem has been adversely impacted by construction and careless individual action, and at the same time the effects of degradation on constructed environment and society can be easily perceived. In Bayamón, an emerging leader generation following the lead of Mayor Rivera, promotes conservation, protection, responsible utilization and replenishment of the five types of capital which are recognized as crucial to the sustainability of a robust and vibrant socio-economic development. Within this framework, the smart developments and effective management practices implemented on the *Bayamón Sustainable Corridor* (the river system and its urban surroundings) have become a symbol and a model to follow influencing favorably decisions at the regional level and state level. More and more other municipalities are watching the development model of Bayamón and regulatory standards are being reconsidered after paradigms set forward through implementation of successful practices demonstrating a different pathway for development.

Ramón Luis Rivera Cruz is convinced that educating for sustainability requires community wide involvement and through novell program implementation seeks that the people of Bayamón acknowledge the basic principle that sustainable cities are not improvised, neither emerge by coincidence, but on the other hand, are the result of determination and sound individual decisions. Public policy for sustainability adopted by his administration has brought numerous benefits among which one can mention the development of green infrastructure, the establishment of health prevention programs addressing the risks of obesity, diabetes and asthma in our population , and among the people, an adequate perception of value and the desire to do things correctly. In Bayamón local environmental challenges are today being met with ample citizen participation that first recognizes that important determinants of environmental quality are the decisions and behaviors of individuals everywhere; and second, that one generation must

understand the needs and aesthetic desires of future generations. Public education provides for awareness, informed choices and social responsibility.



Mayor Rivera has been very active taking personal care of the dissemination of environmental awareness and sensibility. His continuous involvement can be observed through supervision of development projects, rapid intervention when environment degradation is observed, effective communication with the citizens through the media; publications and through the Municipal Web-Site.

(www.municipiodebayamon.com)



Public participation in project inaugural events is stimulated, as to educate and promote active enjoyment of infrastructure and services.



Programa Salud a tu Alcance (Health within your reach): stimulates the care of personal health through projects for the prevention and management of diabetes, obesity and other common medical problems of our population as cancer, asthma, and cardiovascular disease.

Rivera's leadership and commitment to a balanced and sustainable development of the Bayamón and Río Hondo Basins is outstanding. The project for the *Bayamón Sustainable Corridor* is an initiative the Mayor has been promoting since 2004 and which addresses the need for formal adoption of policies to protect environment in areas that impact the ecosystems of both rivers and that may affect the quality of life. Many projects have been precedents to this formality and all have been guided through an environmental enhancement policy oriented as to provide for the healthy integration of man, constructed environment and nature.

Following is a brief description of recent initiatives and achievements that enhance Bayamón's environment and evidence sensitive practices:

All Hazard Mitigation Plan (June 2003), Recorded the historic events and clearly identified the hazards of not caring for life and property related to the river ecosystem. Mitigation initiatives in this plan have guided interventions as care of critical infrastructure, relocation of families, continued cleaning and maintenance of the River Basin; and have pointed the need of coordinated efforts among the six municipalities through which the rivers cross and of the public and private entities that can assist the sustainable development of the River Basins.



Junte Verde is a yearly thematic festival or celebration and on this day the population of the region participates in an environmental education endeavor experiencing directly the blessings of nature.



Municipal Growth Management Plan has established clear policies for the management of sensitive ecosystems and has identified and classified sensible areas, defining the needed management and development controls for wetlands, aquifers, delicate flora and fauna ecosystems, and for archeological findings as well.

The Central District Neighborhood Revitalization Plan addresses the degradation of the environment and population loss, natural to the aging of the city and through public and private initiatives deals with urban life scars that through the years had become more evident in central areas: homelessness, inadequate shelter, mounting crime, paralyzing gridlock, decaying infrastructure, polluted air and water. Comprehensive Planning with strategic implementation have been changing the face of Central Bayamón. Initiatives include Transit oriented development (TOD)¹ new housing developments, the reconstruction of market areas and the revamping of all areas with green infrastructure and new urban amenities. Seven Main Neighborhoods are being impacted through sustainable and smart growth projects and coordinated efforts between private entities, local, municipal and federal governments.

Reforestation of public surroundings has taken place through public and corporate initiatives. Among public projects have been the planting of indigenous species (15,000 new plants each year) and establishing a Municipal Plant Nursery. Also the involvement of rehabilitated ex-substance-abusers and people with physical and mental impairments in the reforestation project has provided employment opportunities and taken people away from the streets. Among corporate initiatives: mandatory mitigation regulations have restored the balance of wetlands in our territory; implementation of educational initiatives; facility maintenance have set models and competitive spirit towards beautifying the city.

Mass Transit initiatives are being promoted. On February 2005 the Urban Train System serving the Metropolitan Area began operation with three stations serving the *Bayamón Sustainable Corridor*. The municipality has assigned Ramón Luis Rivera Cruz, is committed to a balanced and sustainable development of the resources for the establishment of an integrated Trolley/Bus System. **This multimodal system will attain multiple objectives: connecting urban sectors, reducing traffic congestion, pollution emissions and city heat.**

Special Zoning Districts for the surroundings of the Urban Train provide special codes for densification, lower parking requirements, for pedestrian connections, and design and landscape architecture guidelines.

Imbedded in all initiatives at the *Bayamón Sustainable Corridor* is the pride for natural, historical and cultural heritage. Projects foster social bonding, individual physical health and community identity and awareness.

The rescue of patrimonial inventory - many historic buildings and settings have been restored and returned to the public through uses for cultural education or recreation: among them

¹ TOD – Transit Oriented Development increases pedestrian activity around transit stations with positive effects on the customer base of local businesses and tax revenues and local property values. At the same time reduces pressure of development in remote areas and decreases air pollution associated with automobile travel.

Francisco Oller Museum, Olazabal Building housing the Workforce Investment Program and Head Start Educational Programs, the Vela Building housing the Fine Arts School, the Hacienda Santa Ana, housing a factory established since the nineteenth century, it is a private property restored by its owners and with a museum to showcase historic value of this site.

The North Coastal Plain of Puerto Rico is sustained on a geological belt that runs the territory from east to west. This is a resource with storage capacity for great amounts of ground water and clandestine garbage/junk deposits has threatened its quality. A **Municipal Environmental Vigilance Corps** controls for illegal deposits, dilapidated private property, abandoned vehicles, and recommends actions for infrastructure maintenance and the enhancement of public areas. Also the Municipality has carefully selected a **strategic site for recyclable garbage/junk deposits**. This initiative will contribute to the conservation of the Karst Region and in the near future this site will serve as a platform for a major recycling project, but while this is achieved, the municipality has in place a recycling pilot project in 7 urbanizations and 27 schools; a strategic alliance with *ProNatura*, a private recycling company, conducting a door-to-door recycling program for 4,000 housing; a friendly environment for businesses interested in investing in recycling-related activities.

Public Art Projects enhance the character and visual distinction of the city. Outstanding projects have been La Red by artist Luis Torruellas enhancing Road 167 and symbolizing collective potential; Fountain Sculpture marking the Northern Entrance to the Bayamón Center; the Palm Tree at Road 167, marking the northwestern entrance to the Center and as a remembrance to native flora of the coastal plain where Bayamón is located; Central Park Allegories, anticipating the modernity of the Sports Complex and the modern multimodal transit system serving Bayamón. And, now developing, Parque Estrella del Norte, designed by the world renown artist Pablo Rubio, located near the Western and furthestmost terminal of the Urban Train, as symbol of the guiding principle that “humans are not distinct from nature but can use nature for human endeavors as long as coterminous subtle effects of timing and spatial positioning are in harmony”².

A Campaign for the promotion of positive values stimulates acknowledgement of environmental concerns (for example on garbage disposal, on maintenance of private property and care of public infrastructure) and triggers collective power towards city management and appreciation.

The resources already invested by Bayamón (public and private) in sustainable and smart growth initiatives, have demonstrated possibility and that **environmental concerns come to be a very strong unifying factor for all territories**. These echo **New Diplomacy** in the World that addresses issues as, environment, security and human rights, among others.³

² Cities in our Future / Edited by Robert Geddes. “Based on the Conference on Cities in North America held in New York in 1996. Island Press. 1997.

³ After the World War II and with the formation of the United Nations a process began that generated a “New Diplomacy” challenging many of the perceptions of the “Old or Traditional Diplomacy”. A plethora of issues concerning , human rights, humanitarian , Labor , environmental and security issues have challenged traditional notions of sovereignty and the sanctity of national boundaries in all cases reaffirming the assertion that other governments might have a concern on another country “sovereign domestic” issues, like transboundary environmental issues (acid rain, air and water pollution, global warming, marine fisheries, biotechnology and trade.)

Paseo del Río and the Bayamón Golf Course are representative projects of environmental sensitive practices where interventions are smoothed through low impact developments, reforestation and landscape architecture, but as well serve as engines to rethink and redevelop areas of high activity, as quality environments with meaningful socio-economic opportunities.

Benefits both projects account for are:

- Erosion and sedimentation control
- Reversed desertification
- Reforestation and conservation of biodiversity
- Enhancement of river conveyance to avoid flooding
- Revamping dilapidated industrial areas.
- Contribution to decrease global warming and reduction of CO 2 emissions through physical sequestration
- Environmental Management & Accounting, CSR, SRI⁴
- Increased valuation of area properties
- Rekindling of economic activity of the area
- Contribution to poverty reduction through education, jobs, and new ways for capital growth
- Social bonding and networking.

An Agenda for the Region based on Environment as the Unifying Factor

Outstanding projects as Paseo Río Bayamón and the Bayamón Golf Course, have stimulated momentum for the **Paseo del Mar Development**. *Paseo del Mar* is conceptually constructed envisioning the sustainable development of the *Metropolitan District of Northern Puerto Rico*. A network of natural waterways interconnects municipalities that are part of the actual metropolitan conglomerate. Bayamón, Guaynabo, Cataño, Toa Baja and San Juan, all municipalities in this geographical region, have experienced the impact of the uncontrolled growth of the past four decades manifest in population increase, urban sprawl and complexity as well as degradation of natural and constructed environment.

Through the leadership of Ramón Luis Rivera Cruz, **mobilization of different sectors has begun and new paradigms are being set:**

- **Municipal governments as facilitators;**
- **Local and international private investment must be the driving force;**
- **A new Economic Platform promoting calibrated mixed use developments within a Regional Environmentally Sustainable Socio-Economic Development Model coupled with Implementation of Second Generation Model II Reforms and with Global Connectivity.**

Paseo del Mar Development represents a strategy setting winds for the reconciliation of a robust and stable economy for Puerto Rico.

⁴ CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility; SRI – Social Responsible Investment.

Paseo del Mar has the capability of addressing fundamental international environmental law principles as the following:

- Human beings have the right to an environment adequate for their health and well being
- Global environment is a common concern for humanity
- Communities have common but differentiated responsibilities and possibilities
- A sense of duty must ensure that particular nor collective actions cause environmental harm
- Sustainability can be achieved if environmental protection is integrated to the development process
- The right to development is to be fulfilled equitably meeting the needs of present and future generations

Paseo del Mar seeks to conform a regional allegiance initiated by the municipalities of Bayamón, Toa Baja and Cataño. As for the beginning of the project, Bayamón has assumed team leadership to, progressively and with determination, assist the development of 80 square kilometers along the east and west bank of the twin Bayamon and Rio Hondo Water channels, and the river deltas extending to the east up to Isla de Cabras and to the west up to Punta Salinas. Up to date three Municipalities are involved in the Paseo del Mar (Bayamón, Toa Baja and Cataño) but one of the goals is that in the long run all of the municipalities through which the River passes be involved.

Among projects of the *Paseo del Mar Development* are:

- Expand the concept of a Sustainable Corridor to the entire extension of the River Basin, and Develop Guidelines and a Special Zoning District
- Define water and air quality standards and implement monitoring strategies
- Develop a Master Regional Plan for the Basin: identify spaces for Projects for gardens, parks, high tech agriculture, landscaping, natural channel conditioning and maintenance, reforestation, as to conform the green infrastructure that will support sustainable future developments
- Promote investors interest for projects of active and passive recreational, ecotourism, commerce, retail, housing cultural, high tech industry, use of channels for recreational transportation.

Emphasis will be placed on:

- The development of the SME'S and services sector which is our comparative Advantage.
- Implement an environmental education and participation strategy as to involve local residents and external visitors.
- Increasing biodiversity through the protection of species (flora and fauna)
- Accounting for sustainability modeled in the Kyoto Protocol
- Historic remembrance: A celebration and recreation of the original sea routes during 17 century; Inventory of natural and constructed patrimony and promote integration to development concept
- Facilities to promote health of the population
- Education, transfer of knowledge and capacity building, knowledge based development
- Differentiation and Branding: using strategic marketing to promote image, products, attractiveness for tourism and foreign capitals.

- Developing export capacity for goods and services to enhance competitive advantages of the region.

The main development strategy for this Project is to establish a legal and administrative framework that will promote “a place defined by its life forms, its topography and its biota, rather than by human dictates; a region governed by nature, not legislature”⁵. Sustainability implies in Bayamón promoting grassroot efforts to revitalize our city. Individual action is stimulated as to add up for collective harmonious achievement.

As envisioned by Ramón Luis Rivera Cruz, “a principal goal of this project is the development of sustainable communities throughout the region that will have the ability to keep healthy and prosperous considering long term effects on economy, ecology and social equity”.



⁵ Sale K. (1985) Dweller in the Land: The Bioregional Vision.