



Andrey León | Tico Times

A Port With a Future: The long-neglected Caribbean port city of Limón anxiously awaits the infusion of funds and energy promised by a new program of urban renewal and port improvement, to be funded by both public and private sources.

Limón Dreaming

By Chrissie Long
Tico Times Staff

LIMÓN – A handful of community leaders sat around a table one evening four years ago to dream about the future of their city.

They painted the fading buildings with their eyes, mentally renovated the port to comfortably accommodate more tourists and, in the backs of their minds, dressed up their downtown with restored buildings and parks.

Now, the plans that for years lived only on blackboards and scribbled notes are inching their way to reality.

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias last

week signed a bill providing \$80 million dollars to the Caribbean port town of Limón to initiate a full-scale renovation project and to boost the goal of attracting nearly \$900 million in additional private investments.

“There is still a lot of disbelief that this will go through,” said Noel Ferguson, businessman and former president of the local Chamber of Commerce. “We are not used to getting (completed) projects or funding.”

Limón always has been Costa Rica’s forgotten port, or at least that’s how most *limonenses* feel as they watch buildings crumble without attention, water flood their streets without solutions and crime and drugs

tighten their grip on the people.

When the United Fruit Company pulled out of the city in the 1960s, it left not only rusting railroad equipment and empty mansions, but also deep chasms in the governing of the seaside community.

Limón grew up under the wing of the United Fruit Company. It found its identity in the thousands of immigrants who came to its shores to work, first on the railroad, and then on banana plantations. The multinational giant built roads, homes and commercial buildings, repaired roads and bridges, and managed the daily operations of the port.

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NEWS

Drake Bay's Isolation Brings Both Peace and Trouble

Beauty, isolation and tranquility are among the many attractions offered by Costa Rica's Drake Bay, on the Osa Peninsula. However, sea-faring, nocturnal bandits disrupt the peace.

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BUSINESS

Free Trade Talks With China Face Local Opposition

Not only do Costa Rica's negotiators of a Free Trade Agreement face tough negotiators across the table, but representatives of many key local economic sectors are up in arms.

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WEEKEND

Filmmakers Take Aim At Gun Culture

Two University of Costa Rica sociologists seek to explore the issue of increased gun ownership among Costa Ricans in a documentary film project.

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CENTRAL AMERICA

Shopping Mall Love Affair

The region's largest commercial center developer says Central Americans are still going to the malls, and so they're still building more.



Property Tax Assessments Boosted

By Daniel Shea
Tico Times Staff

After nearly 15 years, Costa Rican municipalities still are adjusting to their role as assessors of property values, with the vast majority of Costa Rican homes officially listed far below their market value, according to a government study.

But the localities' hesitance to take full advantage of the new program – or their lenience in enforcement – likely has been a blessing for both property owners and the municipalities alike, experts say.

The massive reserve of potential funding that was opened to the municipalities in 1995 – when municipalities were given the power to directly tax the properties within their jurisdiction – has been tapped only timidly.

Property owners now are paying \$5 tax for every \$2,000 of their homes' values, as opposed to \$12 for every \$2,000 before the law changed. Even so, income from the tax has risen significantly – at about 2 percent per year, according to the Finance Ministry's Tax Assessment Office (ONT).

“What we found was that the municipi-

palities were much more efficient at collecting the taxes” than the central government, which processed the tax before 1995, according to Alberto Poveda, director of the ONT.

Under the current law, property owners must present their municipality with a declaration of the value of their property at least every five years – the majority of which are declared “excessively low,” Poveda said. Municipalities have the option of rejecting this number and assigning their own, or accepting the declaration.

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Project Offers Rebirth for a Neglected City

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When the United Fruit Company abruptly withdrew, the Costa Rican government established the Atlantic Port Authority (JAPDEVA), which was tasked with the dual role of managing the port and improving it.

"The idea was to develop the port which would, in turn, bring strong economic development to the city," said Ana Grace McLean, an institutional coordinator with JAPDEVA, while sitting in an office space that overlooks a large parking lot full of shipping containers. "But we didn't see improvement in the city of Limón. After 40 years, we did not advance. (And during the first part of this decade), we had the opportunity to do something."

McLean and Ferguson, who both grew up in Limón, envisioned a safer, aesthetically pleasing and inviting hometown. So, with the help of other local leaders and backed by a \$335,000 donation from Japan, they began studying ways to revive the port.

A Land of Opportunity

Driving through the lively streets of downtown Limón in an old pickup truck, as the late afternoon sun bathed the city in a rich glow, Abraham Goldgewicht saw through the tired buildings with peeling paint to what the city can become.

Goldgewicht grew up in Limón and spent his childhood playing in a large, airy retail space that's been in his family for three generations. Today, his children run between the artists and fish tanks of that same store, pausing only to say "hello" to regulars.

"Limón has always been put on the backburner," said Goldgewicht, as he pointed to



Christie Long | Tico Times

Faded Beauty: The city of Limón, on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, offers a unique flavor, including in its architecture, that is set to be enhanced and with the promise of new monies.

empty warehouses and unused shipyards. "But, if this money is taken advantage of, it could be the best thing that has happened to this city...to this country."

He drove past a home with beams beginning to sag and gestured to the front doorstep, where a woman spends her days carving coconuts. She offers a glimpse of the historical Limón that perhaps the tourists could enjoy, he said.

He stopped at a street-side restaurant and pointed to a menu full of items that Limón created, such as rice and beans flavored with coconut.

Then, there are also the shipyards with historical railroad equipment and the downtown charm of Caribbean Victorian homes with long balconies and colorful façades.

With cruise ships anchoring in Limón and new lines that expect to originate in the Caribbean city, Goldgewicht said, "There is so much opportunity here."

Giving Limón a Base to Grow

The \$80 million investment that Arias signed last week has been stretched over five main areas: restoration of cultural buildings, drainage and sanitation improvements, enhancement of municipal functions, small business development and port modernization.

Divided among 17 different projects, the money is not intended to fund a complete overhaul, but rather as a base to encourage complementary private investment.

"Once the work begins, it's our hope that the private sector will step in to do its part," said Ferguson. "The initial investment of \$80 million is meant to show that the government is committed to this project, too."

A few project highlights include construction of a new road to the port in order to

redirect some of the large 18-wheelers that so often clog the main road; rehabilitation of the old train yard and its conversion into a tourist destination, complete with shops, restaurants and artifacts; and renovation of Limón's Parque Cariari by the same group that created INBioparque in Heredia.

"We want to revive the heritage of the city, which includes its cultural, natural and architectural assets, to rescue its unique cultural identity, while improving the liveability and attraction to visitors," said McLean, as she flipped through images of the city on a PowerPoint computer program.

A Lingering Disbelief

Andrés Shum León sat back in his chair and looked out at the waves rolling in on the shoreline.

He shook his head and said, "I like to think that it's something, but I am not sure it's enough."

"What about the airport? Or the cell phones? Or the roads?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "I'm not sure if it can really make a difference."

Shum, the grandson of a Chinese immigrant, grew up in Limón. He left for a time but returned to open a 25-room hotel and restaurant on a cove between Moin and Limón.

"It's not that people here don't want to see change," Ferguson explained, "It's just that they can't believe it will happen. They've gone for so long without seeing anything improve."

Shum's hotel, the Cocori Hotel Bar and Restaurant, which is perched above Playa Bonita, a pristine pocket of coastline just minutes from downtown, caters mainly to traveling businessmen. Although he'd like to attract more tourists, he's not letting his hopes get too high.

"(With the improvements), it's not like everything is going to be OK," Shum said. "But it's a start."

A Welcoming Entryway

The city of Limón sits at the intersection of the global market and Costa Rica's shores, watching 80 percent of the country's commerce pass through its doors every day.

It's the front door for tourists unloading from cruise lines and for businessmen negotiating the shipment of products.

And the people, who live sandwiched between the English-speaking Caribbean and the *pura vida* of the inland, represent an untapped market for tourism growth.

Although the port town may be struggling today, Goldgewicht brushed his arm over the horizon, "This is Limón," he said. "Now, close your eyes and start dreaming." ■

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