**Limón Dreaming**

**By Chrissie Long**

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 scrawled 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 boost the goal of attracting nearly $900 million in additional private investments.

“Limón has 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 has always 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 munitions, but also deep chasms in the governing of the seaside community.

Limón grew 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.

**Property Tax Assessments Boosted**

**By Daniel Shea**

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 — about 2 percent per year, according to the Finance Ministry’s Tax Assessment Office (ONT).

“What we found was that the municipalities were much more efficient at collecting the taxes than the central government, which processed the tax before 1995,” said 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.
Project Offers Rebirth for a Neglected City

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 revitalize 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 Goldwicht saw through the tattered buildings with peeling paint to what the city could become.

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

"Limón has always been put on the backburner," said Goldwicht, as he pointed to 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 coast, Goldwicht 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 Carriero 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 Leon 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 am 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 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 Cosco Hotel Bar and Restaurant, which is perched above Playa Limón and 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 businesses negotiating the shipment of new 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, Goldwicht brushed his arm over the horizon, "This is Limón," he said. "Now, close your eyes and start dreaming."