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Executive Summary

Taking Action

Tren Urbano as a Catalyst for Community Involvement

by

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Executive Summary

The first phase of the TREN URBANO is set to be in operation by the year 2001. And potential users are constantly being reminded of how, when it is complete, it will greatly improve the quality of our lives. Yet the TREN URBANO does not magically materialize, there is a whole process that is being carried out by contractors, architects, engineers, planners, to mention a few. It is proposed that the community be allowed to participate in this process too.

The broad undertaking of this research project is to empower citizens to take action in their community, to establish partnerships among different sectors within the community and to create a common vision through which the community can define itself. More concretely, this project has three objectives: assess the community's perception of the TREN URBANO, assess the level of collaboration existing among the different sectors within the community, and finally suggest actions which would create a more collaborative effort.

During the initial phase of research, a relevant local experiment on community participation came to light. In May of 1999, UPR (Mayagüez) philosophy professor Héctor Huyke presented his students with an *optional* activity as a final examination: they would meet with their classmates in a designated area and together they would each plant a fern under a specific tree on campus. Although the activity was voluntary, an overwhelming majority participated. They overcame great obstacles in order to participate in the activity, but nearly every person -- students, the professor, and the university landscape workers -- talked positively, even enthusiastically about the experience. Students shared a sense of pride, ownership, accomplishment. The students and the university employees also described how they had found a sense of community where there had not been one and a sense of belonging to the place they had just walked by every other day of their college lives. Yet perhaps one of the most relevant comments was made by a student who acknowledged that if someone (in this case, the professor) had not suggested the activity, it might never have been carried out. This tells us of the need for an action catalyst -- someone or something to get the ball rolling. This research

would suggest that the TREN URBANO and the public improvement projects which accompany it could serve as an action catalyst to get people involved.

Further research was done through books, pamphlets, newspaper articles of organizations such as Project for Public Spaces, Liveable Communities, U.N. Sustainability Programme, Department of Transportation. The previously mentioned community activity and the research of literature led to a hypothesis: Community members **are** interested in public improvement projects, such as those that are part of the TREN URBANO, but they are not organized and do not have models to guide them. An activity, such as the one carried out by the group at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, can offer people who haven't been involved in community activities, the chance to gain skills, and for those who do have experience it will be an opportunity for them to put their knowledge to work, to the benefit of the community. If smaller, perhaps more easily organized activities are successful, these will pave the way and motivate people to get involved in, or even initiate further actions.

A successful activity will first have to take into account local behaviour and perceptions. The assessment of people's perceptions of the TREN URBANO and the assessment of the level of collaboration among different community sectors will be done through the evaluation of discussions in focus groups. Focus groups, as opposed to questionnaires for example, are effective in providing an initial overview of public opinion that will help to define the issues. There will be a focus group for the primary community groups: residents, business sector, municipal workers and Tren Urbano officials. These groups will consist of 7-9 members purposely selected to have opposing views, in order to create as much discussion as possible. Based on the analysis of the discussion a community activity will be suggested **and carried out** in collaboration with the community.

Currently the TREN URBANO Office is conducting a series of community activities related to the TREN URBANO, such as the Feria Tren Urbano, weekly visits to schools, seminars. These activities are focused on orientation and awareness of the public regarding the TREN URBANO. It is proposed that, building on these activities, there also be activities which provide for a more direct participation of community members in the actual process. One aspect of the project which is not yet in its final

phase of development is the design of station access corridors. The TREN URBANO office has outlined the key pedestrian corridors at each train station. Improvements must be made along each of these corridors. There is an area within the TREN URBANO contract limits, an area where others (usually municipality or other public institutions) will carry out the improvements and there is a third area, where no one has yet claimed responsibility for the necessary improvements. These "unclaimed" areas could bring in help from all the different sectors of the community, meaning the business sector, residents, municipality. In addition, the TREN URBANO office has already been considering facilitating improvements in these areas beyond their contract limits.

For this investigation, the focus will be on one station area in particular. If the project is successful in one station, it can, in the future, serve as a model for implementation in other stations. The investigation has chosen to focus on the Bayamón (Centro) Station. Bayamón is an autonomous municipality, therefore the local government has more flexibility to take actions. The train station is right next to the traditional town center; a location which creates a strong sense of place. There is a mix in commercial and residential land-use, which will allow for the creation of partnerships and for a greater likelihood of citizen participation.

The municipality of Bayamón, headed by the local Planning Office, is currently undertaking a large-scale project aimed at revitalizing the main downtown access road (Calle Parque). The plan includes the building of a new government center with a new public library, more public spaces, such as mini-parks and mini-shopping centers and improving pedestrian corridors. And the plan does in fact make reference to the TREN URBANO when describing, for example, the need to improve the pedestrian corridor. In preparing the project, the municipality did consult with the business sector, through the Asociación de Comerciantes, and the TREN URBANO Office takes into account the municipal plan when it diagrams the access corridors. However, the project has not had much citizen involvement. Public hearings were held, but fewer than ten people attended.

The municipal pedestrian access corridor improvements have not yet been completed and those under the TREN URBANO contract have not even been fully designed yet. There is ample opportunity for residents, the business sector, the

municipality and the TREN URBANO Office to get involved and work together on these improvements. There will be a two-fold benefit. The TREN URBANO will have gained a strong sense of association (to the train) from the participants, which will encourage respect and the eventual usage of the train. The participants themselves will have gained a sense of accomplishment, which may motivate them to participate in further improvement projects in their community, perhaps even relating to the TREN URBANO. For example, people may organize small-scale activities at the stations, which in turn would bring even more people to the trains. And as natural result of such activities, a stronger TREN URBANO culture will have been created.