

Candidate wants to see an island with 78 diverse Old San Juans

BY JON RUST

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Rogelio Figueroa, the gubernatorial write-in candidate for the fledgling Puerto Ricans for Puerto Rico Party, sees an island with 78 diverse Old San Juans, where people can walk to the store to do their shopping, where residents don't have to rely on cars, the economy is centered around local businesses owned by entrepreneurs with ties to the community who care about the social and environmental health of their surroundings. Where extended families can live "two streets apart, not two hours."

A "restoration economy" based on urban renewal, mass transit, stopping sprawl, and promoting small business would help bring about that vision, he said in an interview Tuesday.

Areas like one in a photo he showed of a section along the Baldorioty de Castro are abandoned and a "visual nuisance."

The self-contained Old City, on the other hand, one of the island's top destinations for tourism, can be used as a model for the development of island towns, he said.

"When we want to enjoy ourselves, we go to Old San Juan," he said. "That means we live in a city that's not enjoyable."

Figueroa, an entrepreneur who studied chemical engineering, said his economic development policies would "allow us to not only have economic growth, but environmental restoration."

He would work to cut down dependence on cars, which jam the streets and fill the air with pollutants. Businesses that "fix" the environment through, for example, reforestation or recy-

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cling, would not be taxed.

The participation rate in the formal economy is only 42 percent here, he noted, while on the mainland it is closer to 70 percent.

By removing obstacles for local entrepreneurs, the economy would begin to thrive, and more people would be part of the formal economy, increasing the tax base and allowing government to downsize and cut tax rates.

He called for the "efficient and reasonable" use of natural resources, which he said are quickly disappearing.

The "construction" model of expanding into pristine areas is actually destruction, he said. It also leads to an over-reliance on cars and expensive fuel.

"We have to stop the destruction of green areas and go back and repair the urban centers," he said. "We have to make sure development makes people happier . . . It's the only way to get from the current development to sustainable development."

He would put an immediate freeze on zoning changes, restructure the Planning Board, develop a master plan for restoration, and put a halt to all major construction projects in green areas.

A strong, local-business based economy would also cut down on crime because it would give people employment opportunities, he said.

Some 90 percent of the capital invested here comes from off the island, he said.

Creating a local Puerto Rican economy would "take us from being a labor society to being an entrepreneurial society."

He would work to reduce the cost of energy and drinking-water production and provide incentives for companies that work in those areas, among others.

Instead of more traditional infrastructure like roads, Figueroa said, Puerto Rico needs "social opportunity" and knowledge infrastructure.

"We need construction, but we need better construction," he said.