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La Playa de Ponce struggles to stay afloat



PONCE - The La Playa Barrio in this city is trying to stay afloat despite a marked population decline and a sea of problems that seem to be sinking it. But that the vast majority of 'Los Playeros', as its residents identify themselves, are willing to overcome these adversities.

With the help of various entities, some of them on the mainland USA, the community organization *Un Nuevo Amanecer Inc.* has carried out several studies and projects in order to understand the challenges through empirical data and to look for solutions, explained the leader of the group, Ramón Figueroa Feliciano, who together with the advisor David Southgate, sat down with Es Noticia to present the findings of a just released study of residents' perceptions about flooding.

In broad terms, Barrio Playa community is home to 11,400 people today, compared to the estimated 20,000 in the 1970s. It has a dozen neighborhoods, a figure that is not precise because some identify small streets as sectors.

La Playa was an economic center of the city at the beginning of the last century. It had a port and large structures that were used as warehouses and commercial premises.

The architectural firm Louis Amy AE Studio recently presented Es Noticia with a proposal for the development of La Playa, but clarified that residents must be involved in order to make the firm's ambitious proposal viable.

Meanwhile, the organization *Un Nuevo Amanecer Inc.* along with leaders from La Playa, continues to work to improve the quality of life in a community rich in history and culture.

Recurrent flooding

One of the most recent studies by the organization was a survey on residents' perception of the problem of past and future flooding, as well as support for climate adaptation measures, including the desire to relocate or mitigate the flooding problem.

The results of that survey were presented to the residents in four communities meetings on September 19 and 20. The results were not encouraging.

The survey did not cover all of La Playa, only the residents in neighborhoods most affected to understand their feelings about the floods and how prepared they are to deal with the situation.

100% of the residents in the Puerto Viejo sector answered that it was "extremely likely" that within the next 12 months their residence would be flooded again.

A similar response, although at a lower percentage, was given by the total of 260 residents who answered the survey, residents of the following sectors: Puerto Viejo, Playa Centro, Salistral, Los Meros, Los Potes, Vista del Mar and Amalia Marín.

Southgate, who has worked with the federal Environmental Protection Agency, better known as the EPA, said these are communities connected to a collapsed storm water management system. The remedy for years has been to rely on a system of pumps that must draw water from the community and release it into the sea. But, when the community has needed it most, the system has failed.

"There are several factors that influence the abandonment of La Playa, such as basing decisions on questionable data that do not take into account the people who live here," Southgate said.

Southgate, along with the community leader, explained that the zoning of the site uses 2009 FEMA Flood Maps that classify areas as flood-prone. According to residents, some areas declared as flood prone are not, making it impossible for residents to have funds allocated to relocate to properties on higher ground within the Barrio.

However, they cannot buy in another neighborhood on La Playa because, according to the maps, practically all of La Playa is floodable. That is an impediment to receiving the federal money. The flooding problem is confirmed by the residents themselves, but can it be corrected, Southgate was asked. "Protecting the coasts can be done. The money is there, it's taking control," he replied.

They pointed out that using the wrong classification has the effect of disintegrating the community little by little until La Playa is left without residents and at the mercy of fate because there is no official plan to improve the quality of life. Southgate assures that La Playa could have redefined flood classifications and that there are federal funds to work with communities vulnerable to climate change.

"There has been lax maintenance of protective infrastructure," he said before pointing out that this neglect provokes dropping property values and the deterioration of the houses and structures.

"This looks like it was orchestrated," commented Figueroa Feliciano.

They do not want to leave the beach

The survey also showed that more than half of the respondents do not want to move out of their neighborhoods, although a percentage of them would look for housing and leave the neighborhood if they received the money to do so.

There is also the problem of being allocated funds for relocation and not being able to find a house to buy that meets the requirements established at the federal level.

"La Playa has a lot of good things. Extremely strong people. The people still have a fight to fight," said Southgate, who through the *Anthropocene Alliance* consortium, made up of 200 entities in various states around the nation that fight for climate and environmental justice, have supported *Un Nuevo Amanecer* both technically and in identifying funds.

Survey results:

Are you interested in selling your home to the government and moving out if public funds are available?

- 45% are ready to sell their property

Which of the following considerations are most important to you if you decide to move to a residence that has less likelihood of flooding?

- 84% responded that the safety of their family and home

Which of the following circumstances might facilitate the decision to move to a more flood-safe home?

- 67% responded that rental assistance or money for a security deposit.

If you are interested in moving Where would you like to move?

- 66% other home residence on the beach
- 8% other location in the Ponce metropolitan area
- 8% other location in Puerto Rico
- 17% to another destination

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