

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

A Better Land Public Policy

MANILA, Philippines — I have no problem about the government plans to sell equipment, facilities, or corporate assets, like the sequestered television stations or state-owned corporations like the PNOC Exploration Corp.

Government officials, according to newspaper reports, said that television stations RPN 9 will be privatized this year and IBC 13 next year. With respect to RPN 9, the privatization will affect only the 20 percent interest held by the government, not the majority stock already owned by the private sector, of the television station.

On the other hand, the government owns 99.79 percent of the publicly listed PNOC-EC. Under the rules of the Philippine Stock Exchange, at least 10 percent of the total shares of the company must be offered to the public no later than November 30. Failure to meet the deadline will not result in the delisting of the PNOC-EC but will subject the company to a fine.

However, Energy Secretary Jose Rene Almendras, according to the news reports, has said the government's position was to defer the share sale because of the current slump in the stock market.

What I'm worried about, however, is the sale of public lands, especially in Metro Manila. Reports say an unidentified developer has offered to buy the 103-hectare property of the state-owned Food Terminal, Inc., in Taguig City for P19 billion, substantially higher than the P13-billion floor price set by the Department of Finance.

The offer is tempting, but I urge the administration to look, not at the immediate and short-term benefits from selling that piece of public land, but to the long-term interest of the government and the people.

For starters, I don't see any urgent reason to sell the FTI property, or even idle public lands in Metro Manila. The government has been claiming increasing revenues and improving debt ratios, resulting in a decline in the fiscal deficit.

According to the DoF, the budget deficit for the first nine months of 2011 amounted to P52.99 billion, way below the P259.79-billion deficit registered in the same period last year and the programmed ceiling of P234.35 billion for the period.

The improved fiscal condition has already prompted the government to lower its deficit ceiling for 2011 from P300 billion to P260.6 billion. In simple terms, the government does not need the money from land sales. So, let's not hurry in selling the FTI property because when it's sold, it's gone forever.

In previous columns I suggested that idle government lands in Metro Manila should be developed into public parks to provide residents some breathing space, in addition to improving and preserving the environment.

This move will lead to a second option, which is encouraging developers to undertake commercial projects in regions outside the metropolis, and which means spreading progress to those areas.

The benefits from these two options are long-term and comprehensive: for Metro Manila residents, a healthy environment; for people in the provinces, a higher standard of living. And for the government, ownership of the lands remains in its hands. In the future, as the government grows in size and the needs of the people increase, lands will be at its disposal.

Even now, I see a need for new sites for some government hospitals like the Philippine General Hospital, which is now swelling at its seams, so to speak; or schools like the Polytechnic University of the Philippines.

We can set up a PGH branch in Quezon City to serve patients from the northern side of Metro Manila, or one in the FTI property for patients from the south. The people are then spared from the cost and inconvenience of traveling from all sides of the metropolis to the PGH site in Manila.

The same thing can be done for the PUP, which will be a big help for students from other parts of Metro Manila as well as those from outside the metropolis.

In addition to parks, government lands that are currently being used as golf courses can be used for other purposes like cultural centers.

In the future, the government may decide to set up a new building or a new facility. Then there would be no problem about where to undertake construction.

The policy should be to use these lands for the benefit of the people while retaining public ownership – for future public use.

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