COMMUNITY PLANNING ASSISTANCE TEAMS

Recovery Planning Concepts

La Playa de Ponce, Puerto Rico
Final Report | September 28, 2021
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This report summarizes the findings of a Community Planning Assistance Team (CPAT) requested by the Municipality of Ponce in January 2020. A CPAT is a volunteer planning team, organized by the American Planning Association (APA) through its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP). The Municipality asked the CPAT to suggest strategic planning visions for La Playa de Ponce that could help guide recovery investments so as to maximize long-lasting benefits.

La Playa is Ponce’s historic port, and because it is located three miles from the city center, it has a sense of identity as a unique and separate place, with its own cultural traditions and history. La Playa faces longstanding economic and environmental problems. As the island economy has declined over the past 15 years, so has port activity. La Playa, in a low-lying coastal location, also is subject to both coastal storms and flooding from much of the city’s urban stormwater runoff. La Playa was affected by the wind, rain, and infrastructure disruptions from Hurricane Maria in September 2017, and the M 6.4 earthquake on January 7, 2020 damaged highways, historic buildings, and the La Guancha boardwalk. Hope for La Playa’s future lies in the large amount of disaster recovery money that is yet unspent.

We recommend using recovery funding as an opportunity for sustainable investment and growth of the local economy, relying on four general planning principles: Dignity, Place-making, Economic Revitalization, and Sustainability. Recovery investments should:

- Reflect local needs as identified by local residents.
- Build on existing cultural and human assets.
- Jointly target human capital and infrastructure needs.
- Be economically and culturally sustainable, based on human and social capital.
- Be environmentally sustainable, emphasizing green infrastructure, natural systems, and resilience.
- Fund future operations and maintenance.

Our proposals cover two major categories:

- **Empowering the Community.** This includes engaging community organizations and building capacity within the City government.
- **Investing in Place.** This includes developing green spaces, enhancing transportation infrastructure, repairing stormwater infrastructure, and rebuilding storm- and earthquake-damaged facilities in La Guancha and La Playa’s historic center.
**Recommendations**

**Engagement and Capacity Building**
- Initiate a community engagement program for La Playa.
  - Establish a permanent advisory council for the entire La Playa district.
  - Designate a municipal planner or other suitable employee to be the La Playa district liaison, and staff the district advisory committee.
  - Establish a public participation program that provides meaningful engagement through accountable processes.
- Build capacity of municipal staff.
  - Identify information, technology, and training needs.
  - Establish an Open Data platform for the City.
  - Create cross-departmental institutional systems that encourage interdisciplinary learning and problem-solving.
- Build capacity of community stakeholders.
  - Consult with existing community-based organizations to identify needs.

**La Guancha**
- Rehabilitate La Guancha for a variety of public uses.
  - Repair boardwalk and kiosks.
  - Rebuild La Guancha Park.
  - Develop plans for joint uses, using the parking lot and the Tarima Héctor Lavoe Stage.
- Improve connections to the Historic Center.
  - Reconfigure roadway access between La Guancha and La Playa’s historic center.
  - Connect La Guancha to the rest of La Playa with a pedestrian/bicycle trail through wetland and open space areas and along (but separated from) appropriate roadways.
  - Run a public shuttle between La Guancha and Avenida Hostos.

**The Port**
- Continue to explore ways to expand the port’s market and support local economic development.

**La Playa Center Vision**
- A vibrant commercial and cultural district on Ponce’s waterfront, representing La Playa’s history and cultural roots, its contemporary cultural and artistic expression, and its commitment to urban sustainability and resilience.
- Take some actions right away.
  - Take inventory of buildings and structures in the Historic Warehouse District.
  - Create a façade program for repair and painting of vacant warehouse exterior walls.
  - Create a Business Association or Main Street District.
  - Strengthen the arts and culture economy.
    - Build on the existing artistic and cultural identity of La Playa to create a long-term sustainable creative economy.
    - Develop a strategic vision, seek a range of funding resources, and support activities such as incubator spaces, arts anchors, and year-round programs of cultural and artistic events.
  - Preserve historic character.
    - Preserve external features and overall form of historic buildings.
    - Reconstruct the Casa del Veterano.
  - Make La Playa Center a model of sustainability and resilience in Ponce.
    - Develop a program to floodproof buildings by raising floors or entire structures.
    - Mitigate the urban heat island effect by adding greenery.
    - Use green infrastructure to reduce stormwater runoff.
    - Create a renewable energy district.
  - Execute a Community Master Plan for Puerto Viejo.
    - Create a Puerto Viejo Advisory Committee of stakeholders.
    - Work with residents on issues such as rehabilitation, relocation, safety, land titles, connections to the commercial center, employment and self-employment, including individual case management as needed.

**Infrastructure: Flooding**
- Make investments to reduce flooding in La Playa.
  - Create a maintenance program for existing storm drains.
  - Improve storm drainage in Avenida Padre Noel, and construct other new storm drains where needed.
  - Incorporate infiltration systems into existing paved areas to support improved drainage during heavy rains.
  - Rehabilitate and enhance maintenance of pump stations.
  - Repair the sanitary sewer system to minimize infiltration of rain and flood waters.
- Invest in watershed-scale flood improvements throughout Ponce, upstream of La Playa.
  - Draft land-use policy that prevents development in wetland areas in Ponce.
  - Identify, protect and possibly purchase specific floodwater retention and infiltration sites, as well as redesign existing parks and green spaces to this end.

**Infrastructure: Transportation**
- Improve connections between existing roadways.
  - Improve the existing access from Avenida Santiago de los Caballeros (PR-12) into La Playa.
  - Improve the intersections between PR-12 and both Calle Puerto Viejo and Villa del Carmen, both of which have only right in / right out access today.
Consider improvements to access to the Expressway, as well as over/under it.

- Provide pedestrian and bicycle access within La Playa and between La Playa and Ponce center.
- Provide a pedestrian and bicycle connection from La Guancha to the rest of La Playa, with a pedestrian/bicycle trail through wetland and open space areas, across PR-12, and along (but separated from) appropriate roadways.
- Improve non-auto access along Avenida Hostos between La Playa and the center of Ponce.

**Neighborhood-Scale Infrastructure**

- Fill in gaps in the network of neighborhood-scale infrastructure, such as green spaces, sidewalks, and bike paths.

**Parks and Open Space**

**Vision**: a model of urban ecological values through a connected network of green, sustainable, and resilient parks and open spaces for the enjoyment and health of residents and for visitors from the city, the region, the island, and beyond.

- Improve and maintain existing parks for resilience, green space, and resident accessibility for active and passive uses.
  - Redesign Parque Enrique Gonzalez, Plaza 65 de Infantería, Parque La Moca, Vistas del Mar Recreation Area, Parque Lucy Grillasco, Parque Villa Carmen, and Park Monagas.
  - Establish “friends” groups of volunteers, for example, a Friends of Parque Enrique González group, to assist the City in supporting and maintaining parks.

- Design parks and park connections to be more sustainable and resilient, with more vegetated green space and less hard-scape, including rain gardens and stormwater detention.
  - Create a green infrastructure workforce development program for youth to train and pay them to maintain green infrastructure.

- Expand public property along the La Playa coastline.
  - Acquire vacant properties on the south side of Avenida los Meros for passive public coastal open space and creation of living shorelines.

- Provide continuous waterfront connections from Río Bucaná to Río Matilde.
  - Design and implement a multiuse path with pervious surfaces directly along the waterfront when feasible and with on-road connections as needed.

- Install living shorelines.
  - Develop and implement a program to install living shorelines at all public coastal areas, where feasible, to reduce erosion and provide ecosystem services.
“The recovery process should not focus only on replacing outdated infrastructure. Instead, it should aim at building better assets, unleashing innovation, and coordinating among interested stakeholders.”

— from the Vision of the Resilient Puerto Rico Advisory Commission, in *Relmagina Puerto Rico*
This report summarizes the findings of a Community Planning Assistance Team (CPAT) requested by the Municipality of Ponce in January 2020. A CPAT is a volunteer planning team, organized by the American Planning Association (APA) through its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP). It is designed to complement (not replace) community planning activities. In this case, the Municipality of Ponce has been developing proposals for funding of recovery projects, but without an overall long-term strategy. The Municipality asked the CPAT to suggest strategic planning visions that could help guide recovery investments so as to maximize long-lasting benefits.

Normally, a CPAT would provide planning assistance by means of a brief, but intensive, in-person visit of several days, which would include field visits, key informant interviews, stakeholder meetings, and collaborative work with local planners. Shortly after APA received Ponce’s proposal, however, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented any travel. As a result, we completed all our work virtually.

We first organized a team of local residents and experts to provide a virtual field visit. This consisted of multiple virtual meetings with Ponce planning staff, review of existing documents relevant to Ponce, and 12 hours of virtual meetings with nine groups of community members, totaling 22 participants. City staff identified the stakeholders and scheduled the meeting, and these groups included representatives of community and cultural organizations, neighborhood community leaders, local business owners, and property owners. Most of the stakeholder interviews were conducted in Spanish. At least three CPAT members, with at least one Spanish speaker, were present at each stakeholder meeting.

Although we were unable to visit La Playa in person, we explored maps, used Google Street View, discovered a few relevant videos, and met with planning and architecture students from Universidad Católica de Puerto Rico (PUCPR and University of Puerto Rico (UPR) who were familiar with La Playa.

In addition, team members reviewed relevant news articles, publicly available reports and maps, documents provided by Municipal staff, and best practices in sustainability and resilience planning, community engagement, placemaking, multimodal transportation networks, open space systems, and environmental design.

This was the first time that APA has ever conducted a virtual CPAT. Although it offered some advantages in terms of flexibility in scheduling, it also lacked the focus that would exist with one intensive week on site with the entire team. This means that the process has stretched over a few months, in addition to the initial delays due to the uncertainties of the pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic has also slowed down many island-wide recovery planning decisions, so there is still plenty of time for Ponce to shape its recovery strategies.

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La Playa is a unique place in Ponce. Although it is one of 31 officially designated barrios in Ponce, and one of the 13 urban barrios, it is much more than an administrative district. La Playa has always been the port of Ponce. Historically, the city center and La Playa have always been connected through their complementary functions. But they are three miles apart, and it is this distance that gives La Playa a unique sense of itself (Map 1). Residents of La Playa speak of themselves first as residents of La Playa, and secondly as residents of Ponce. They have a strong sense of La Playa as a unique and separate place, with its own cultural traditions and history.

La Playa also faces longstanding economic and environmental problems. These existed before the recent disasters, and the hurricanes, earthquakes, and pandemic have only made them worse. The Puerto Rican economy and population have been contracting for 15 years, and the level of port activity has declined significantly. Investments in the port have not reversed this economic reality. Environmentally, La Playa’s coastal location, at the outlet points of Ponce’s urban watersheds, puts it at the receiving end of much of the city’s urban stormwater runoff. Continued development and suburbanization of Ponce has served to increase pavement, which increases the volume and lowers the water quality of the runoff flowing through La Playa. Because much of La Playa is close to sea level, even small amounts of runoff from elsewhere can cause flooding and pollution. Climate change and sea level rise will only exacerbate this situation.

This was the situation in La Playa when Hurricane Maria struck in September 2017, which also occurred in the context of the island’s bankruptcy and fiscal crisis. The winds and rain damaged houses, flooded roadways and public spaces, and generally interrupted infrastructure and public services for many months. The M 6.4 earthquake on January 7, 2020, centered just 14 miles from Ponce, damaged highways and historic buildings, and it caused ground failures at La Guancha, an entertainment boardwalk, park, and beach on the southeast coast of La Playa, that led to its closure to public access. La Guancha, in particular, was severely affected by both Maria and the earthquakes.

Hope for La Playa’s future lies in the large amount of disaster recovery money that is yet unspent. The City of Ponce can
access recovery funds from several existing federal programs. These include:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Public Assistance program, which reimburses governments for the costs of repairing public facilities.
- FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant program, which funds selected mitigation projects.
- HUD Community Development Block Grant, Disaster Recovery funds, which includes a variety of programs potentially useful for Ponce, such as the Economic Development Investment Portfolio for Growth program, Small Business Financing Program, Tourism and Business Marketing Program, and the Non-Federal Match for the FEMA Public Assistance Program and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.
- HUD Community Development Block Grant, Hazard Mitigation funds, which will fund mitigation projects.

Ponce has already applied for funding for several important recovery projects. As of October 2020, Ponce had received $3.8 million from FEMA’s Public Assistance Program for initial engineering services for key public projects, including Enrique González Park in La Playa’s historic center, La Guancha, and the Caribe Tuna Pier near the port in La Playa, as well as the nearby Monagas Park at the confluence of the Rio Bucaná and Rio Portugués. FEMA Hazard Mitigation funding is also in process to support the remediation of flooding problems along Avenida Padre Noel.

These recovery projects can most effectively transform the city—and La Playa—only if they are part of a larger vision. This was our charge: to provide a larger vision that could guide the application of recovery funds to La Playa. La Playa has been facing economic decline and environmental stresses for nearly the past two decades, but with too few opportunities to apply funds that could make a difference. Although the hurricanes and earthquakes have been disasters that have added to La Playa’s challenges, the recovery process provides resources that present a rare opportunity to begin to permanently improve the area. The recovery funds are a gift to a city in need, but only if investments are coordinated for long-term recovery. Invested wisely, recovery funds could not only fix broken infrastructure and buildings but could strengthen La Playa’s ability to resist future stresses and catalyze transformation.

La Playa can also benefit from economic activity in nearby parts of Ponce. The Ponce Convention Center is immediately north of La Playa, on the other side of Highway 52, and is likely to see many events as the pandemic lifts. Nearby, a new Aloft Hotel and Hard Rock Café have just opened this year. This part of Ponce is also the site of a rapidly growing regional medical district, including Hospital Damas, Med Centro, and Ponce Health Sciences University. Elsewhere in Ponce, a new Veteran’s Hospital and associated hotel are being developed, and the former Intercontinental Hotel, near the Castillo up in the hills, will soon reopen under another Marriott brand. Strengthening Ponce’s role as a regional convention and medical center for the southern and western parts of the Island, these facilities will offer employment, while also attracting visitors, patients and their families from out of town. The growth in economic activity and tourist infrastructure can positively benefit business and recreational activities in La Playa.

La Playa is a cultural center for Ponce, with a long history, a unique setting, and countless physical and cultural assets. Most importantly, it has residents committed to La Playa and its future. We propose that Ponce use these strengths as the foundation for a resilient recovery that can transform the barrio.
PLANNING PRINCIPLES

Our recommended planning strategies fall under four general inter-related planning principles or themes:

- **Dignity.** Plans for La Playa should focus on improving the lives of current residents and businesses. These long-time members of the community deserve economic opportunity, protection from flooding, a clean environment, and support for their deeply rooted culture. Because the community is theirs, the plans and planning projects must also be theirs: community members and existing community organizations must be empowered to be partners in these ongoing efforts.

- **Placemaking.** La Playa is a unique place, due to its physical setting, long history as a major port on the south side of the island, heritage building stock, cultural traditions, and the residents' strong sense of community. La Playa's sense of place is its strongest attribute and should be at the center of planning strategies for the area.

- **Economic Revitalization.** For La Playa to continue to exist, residents need jobs, and businesses need customers. But economic revitalization will not come from one project or one sector. It needs to come from the assets that already lie within the community. We propose revitalizing the economy by relying on the two principles above, by supporting the needs of current residents and businesses, relying on placemaking as the driver of community activities, and always following principles of sustainability.

- **Sustainability.** For investments to be long-lasting, they must follow the principles of sustainability. The goal is to improve the lives of La Playa households by surrounding them with a clean and healthy environment, providing steady and long-term livelihoods, and improving their resilience to future earthquakes and hurricanes, even in the face of climate change. Furthermore, because water flows connect the fates of all the parts of the city, this principle needs to extend to all of Ponce. In La Playa, sustainability has three essential pieces:
  - **Cultural sustainability,** to engage existing cultural institutions and community groups in shaping the future of La Playa,
  - **Economic sustainability,** to prioritize the needs of current residents and locally-owned businesses, and
  - **Environmental sustainability,** to enhance the neighborhood’s resilience in the face of natural disasters and climate change.

With these four principles in mind, the Municipality, the Commonwealth and the federal government should use recovery funding as an opportunity for sustainable investment and growth of the local economy. Recovery investments should:

- Reflect local needs as identified by local residents.
- Jointly target both enhancing human capital and meeting infrastructure needs.
- Be economically and culturally sustainable, based on human and social capital in the community.
- Be environmentally sustainable, emphasizing green infrastructure, natural systems, and resilience.
- Pay attention to and adequately fund future operations and maintenance.

This integrated approach to developing projects and programs will build a more resilient La Playa. Each of our recommended strategies addresses all of these sustainability goals, so that the improvements would provide “co-benefits” spanning issues such as flood control, economic development, transportation access, and recreation.

Within La Playa, it will be important to distribute investments between the two primary activity centers of the neighborhood: La Guancha and the historic commercial center located on the coastline east of the mouth of Rio Portugués and around Avenida Hostos. Both areas play essential roles in the community, and neither of them should be overlooked. One focus group participant compared the idea of prioritizing one of these areas over the other to a parent having to choose between their two children—improvements must be spread throughout the community to benefit both key centers.

Our proposals can be thought of in two major categories: projects that focus on investing in the community members, and projects that focus on investing in the physical environment of La Playa:

- **Empowering the Community.** This includes projects such as educational programming, engaging community organizations, and building capacity within the City government. We present this issue in the next section beginning on page 14.

- **Investing in Place.** This includes investments such as developing green spaces, enhancing transportation infrastructure, repairing stormwater infrastructure, and rebuilding storm- and earthquake-damaged facilities. Our recommendations regarding place are broken into four topics in the following four sections:
  - La Guancha.
  - La Playa’s Historic Center.
  - Infrastructure.
  - Parks and Open Space.
EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY

Empowerment through Participation, Collaboration, and Capacity Building

Long term success for the revitalization of La Playa de Ponce requires a robust, collaborative partnership between strong community organizations and effective municipal planning and implementation. In Reimagina Puerto Rico, the Resilient Puerto Rico Advisory Commission emphasized the need for an inclusive, place-based, and transparent approach to building resilient and equitable communities. As the Commission pointed out, “[m]unicipalities…play a key role in establishing community engagement structures that are permanent and guided towards community participation, access to data, and understanding of the recovery processes.” (p. 42-43)

Effective community engagement includes the people and communities that are affected by decisions. It builds partnerships and capacity, consensus around goals and strategies, enhances decision making and improves outcomes by incorporating the experience of stakeholders, and creates a constituency for action. Community stakeholders—residents, business owners, workers, and community organizations—bring their detailed, lived experience of the place and community needs. Municipal departments support the participation of community stakeholders through providing communication and organization methods; objective technical information, analysis, and options; administration of programs and funding sources; and accountability. Capacity building benefits both the community stakeholders and municipal staff.

The International Association for Public Participation has identified a “public engagement spectrum” that details five levels of participation, each of which implies a different level of implicit promise by a public agency to the community in terms of transparency, activity, and decision-making. (https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars)

- **Inform.** At this level, information about conditions, alternatives under consideration, and decision making is made available to community stakeholders to keep them apprised of activities, but they are not invited to comment.
- **Consult.** The community is asked for input on the information provided and the public agency commits to consider comments and opinions when making decisions.
- **Involve.** Greater opportunities to advise and exert influence on decision making are regularly available and there is transparency on how the process affected decisions.
- **Collaborate.** Collaboration requires consensus-building and direct involvement in making decisions.
- **Empower.** Community participants make informed decisions that will be implemented.

With the exception of the "Inform" level, the public engagement spectrum offers increasing levels of meaningful engagement. Characteristics of meaningful engagement include:

- Clear purpose, goals, structure, and process.
- Commitment to the process.
- Inclusive and effective representation of the community.
- Interactive structure and two-way learning.
- Genuine potential for participants to affect the decision-making process and outcomes.

Engagement and Capacity Building Recommendations for La Playa

- **Initiate a community engagement program for La Playa.**
  - Establish a permanent district advisory council for the entire La Playa district. Membership should include representatives of existing community organizations, nonprofits, businesses, and institutions. with attention to ensuring broad representation from all sub-areas within La Playa as well as all demographic and economic groups. Other organizations proposed in this report, such as the Business Association/Main Street organization, and the advisory committee for the Puerto Viejo Master Plan should also have representation. The district advisory council would work with the City to develop a more detailed overall plan for La Playa, including a public engagement program, and work with the City on implementation of specific projects.
  - Designate a municipal planner or other suitable employee to be the La Playa district liaison and staff the district advisory committee. This staff member would also assist the committee and other community organizations to maximize participation in public meetings, planning, and implementation activities.
  - Establish a public participation program that provides meaningful engagement through accountable processes. Ensure that participation is representative and interactive, providing the opportunity for participants to influence decision making for planning and for implementation—explicitly using the Collaborate and Empower levels of engagement.
- **Build capacity of municipal staff.**
  - Identify information, technology, and training needs. Review available data and information to identify gaps and develop a program to fill the gaps.
  - Establish an Open Data platform for the City. Begin with making information, such as maps, census data, and so on, available for La Playa.
  - Create cross-departmental institutional systems that encourage interdisciplinary learning and problem-solving. For example, while the Planning Department may lead a La Playa revitalization program, the City should establish a permanent La Playa Working Group to be convened around planning and implementation for La Playa.
Designate a staff member as a permanent liaison with the La Playa community.

- Build capacity of community stakeholders.
- Consult with existing community-based organizations to identify needs. La Playa has several community organizations with a track record of organizing community programs and events, such as the organization committee for the Carnival de Vejigantes, La Playa Reverdece, and Nuevo Amanecer. Capacity building can include training and support for expanding participation and programs to build younger leadership in the community.

LA GUANCHA/ THE PORT

La Guancha has historically been the focal point for both tourist activity and local community events in La Playa. Before the hurricanes and earthquake, La Guancha had several economic drivers, including the adjacent Port of Ponce (formerly called the Port of the Americas), a boardwalk with many kiosks, and a stage for performances. Local residents have historically enjoyed the area for concerts, festivals, visits to the beach and park, and walks along the waterfront. Tourism was driven by regular docking of cruise ships at the port and day-trip tourists from elsewhere on the island.

Tourist and Day-Use Facilities

La Guancha’s tourist and day use facilities should be rebuilt to serve both tourist traffic and local users.

While tourism related to cruise ships and long-distance tourism has historically been a focus of economic development in La Guancha, refocusing tourist marketing toward serving those making day trips from elsewhere on the island may increase tourist activity. Data from the late 1990s indicated that much of Ponce’s tourist spending came from visitors who did not stay in a hotel room, indicating that they were visiting family or came from nearby cities in Puerto Rico. In the post-hurricane and earthquake conditions, this may still be true. Moreover, cruise ship tourists, from ships docking in Ponce and from day trips by cruise ship passengers docked in San Juan, would also not need hotel rooms.

With the potential for La Playa to benefit from tourists visiting San Juan, the Ponce Municipality may consider coordinating with Discover Puerto Rico to increase the visibility of Ponce and La Playa within island tourism marketing. The Municipality could also work with cruise ship companies and other tourism companies based in San Juan and elsewhere in Puerto Rico to develop day itineraries to highlight the cultural amenities and heritage of La Playa and La Guancha.

Because residents of Ponce also are frequent visitors to La Guancha, focusing investment on projects that serve local residents can ensure a steadier stream of recreational use year-round, rather than the intermittent bursts of tourist traffic associated with cruise dockings and festival events.

Specific improvements in the La Guancha area should include the following:

- Repair boardwalk and kiosks. The boardwalk of La Guancha is not only a tourist attraction but also an important center for locally-owned businesses. The boardwalk and kiosks were damaged by Hurricane María and were closed in early 2020 as a result of damage sustained during the January earthquakes. By rehabilitating the boardwalk area, the Municipality can help small business owners and their staff to return to work while also reviving an important recreation space for community members.

- Rebuild La Guancha Park. In addition to the boardwalk, the park and beach in La Guancha provide an essential recreation space for both local residents and tourists. Investing in the park’s infrastructure, such as installing more space for seating and community gatherings, will make the space more attractive for local residents to use on a regular basis. This will in turn make the space attractive to tourists visiting La Guancha.

- Develop plans for joint uses. Both the parking lot and the Tarima Héctor Lavoe Stage in La Guancha have the potential to serve a wider range of uses than they serve at present. In order to increase the amount of programmable space in La Guancha without building additional physical facilities, the Municipality may consider encouraging and coordinating uses beyond parking, such as pop-up art fairs or performances in these spaces. In addition, the parking lot could also provide transitional space for economic activity during the rehabilitation of the boardwalk and kiosk area. Dual use of the parking lot will inherently limit the number of available parking spaces, so supporting non-automotive modes of transportation concurrently with these alternate uses would be an important consideration. The Municipality may also look to public performance schemes such as the Étoiles du Métro program in the Montréal Metro which creates designated performance spaces and provides visibility for up-and-coming musicians by audition.

- Improve connections to the Historic Center. As described also in the Infrastructure section of this report, the current transportation connections between La Guancha and the historic center are not convenient for autos and not conducive for non-automotive active transportation. The primary route to La Guancha is to travel from the expressway from the east or west and connect to PR-12, which also runs north to central Ponce (Map 1). This is a high-speed route which offers a sidewalk south of the expressway but lacks a bike or pedestrian connection to the rest of La Playa. An alternate route, via the center of La Playa, is PR-123, a bumpy road through an industrial area with only intermittent sidewalks. Transportation actions to address these issues should include:

- Reconfigure roadway access between La Guancha and La Playa’s historic center to provide smoother and more direct vehicular access.
- Connect La Guancha to the rest of La Playa with a pedestrian/bicycle trail through wetland and open space areas, across PR-12, and along (but separated from) appropriate roadways.
- Run a public shuttle between La Guancha and Avenida Hostos. This may be only during events at first, but if it is expanded to a regular service it can help both visiting tourists and local residents who lack car access.

**The Port**

Substantial investment has been made in developing the physical infrastructure of the Port of Ponce (formerly known as the Port of the Americas). In 2004, funding of up to $250 million \(^1\) was set aside by the Puerto Rican government in order to improve the port’s ability to serve larger cargo ships as an international transshipment port. However, in comparison to the Port of San Juan, the Port of Ponce has a much smaller freight capacity and receives fewer cruise ships per year. Additionally, the Jones Act, which requires goods shipped from one American port to another to be shipped on an American-built ship that is American-owned and staffed by an American crew, has limited the appeal of the Port of Ponce when compared to other ports in the Caribbean. The Jones Act increases the cost for shipping between Puerto Rico and other parts of the United States. According to city staff, the Municipality owns the port, with the State Department of Economic Development as a partner, which means that the Municipality has some control over the vision for the Port’s future. The Municipality has been exploring multi-use options for the port, and Hurricane Maria demonstrated that the port has value as a secondary port for the island. While it is important to continue to explore ways to expand the port’s market and include the port in future economic development considerations, investment in the port as an economic driver at the expense of investment in other local infrastructure may be of limited overall benefit to the Ponce community.


La Playa’s traditional carnival parades in the historic center bring out costumed revelers in handmade artistic masks of “vejigantes” (demons) rooted in historic cultural traditions. Omar Alfonso, “Todos a la calle para el Carnaval de La Playa,” La Perla del Sur, February 1, 2017
LA PLAYA’S HISTORIC CENTER

The center of La Playa has played an essential role since the earliest settlement of the City of Ponce (Map 2). While the city center developed inland on the hills, La Playa at the mouth of the Rio Portugués grew from a fishing village in the eighteenth century into Puerto Rico’s most important sugar and coffee export center in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, La Playa has a distinct cultural identity that revolves around LPC’s historic heritage, cultural activities, and coastal environment.

- **Historic character.** While four structures in La Playa are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the ensemble of historic warehouses from the port’s heyday at the turn of the 20th century are not listed. These warehouses occupy the majority of La Playa Center’s (LPC) commercial center and give it a consistent historic and architectural character. Although some warehouses are vacant and in poor condition, others are occupied by businesses that conserve the exterior of these buildings.

- **Cultural character.** The City of Ponce has long been known as a center for the arts—folkloric, popular, and fine arts—and La Playa residents are proud of their area’s distinct cultural and artistic identity. La Playa’s Carnaval de Vejigantes (masked, demon-like figures) is believed to originate in the eighteenth century, before the vejigante tradition emerged in Ponce’s city center. A three- to five-day community Mardi Gras festival, the Carnaval features horned masks made by local artisans, costumes, music, dance, food and parades.

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2 The listings are: Caja de Muertos and Cardona Island lighthouses, a 1908 Methodist Church, and the old U.S. Customs House in an 1842 building that was built as the Spanish Customs House.
Two internationally recognized artists have studios in La Playa, Diego Ballesteros and Antonio Martell Cardona, both of whom have been involved in community arts projects. Ballesteros founded the Casa de Arte y Cultura, a community arts center on Callejon del Tiro, where he has held community education and arts workshops connected to the Carnaval. Martell, whose studio is in a Calle Salmon building that dates from 1815, has collaborated on community arts workshops in La Playa since the 1960s. More recently he led community workshops to design mosaics for Parque Enrique González.

Street art is part of the Ponce artistic identity, and in 2017, the city-sponsored “Ponce es Ley” program resulted in the creation of murals throughout the city, including La Playa. The next year, 2018, the La Playa group, “La Playa Reverdece” (“Regreen La Playa”) organized a mural painting program for La Playa.

Other festivals in LPC include activities around the annual international swimming competition, El Cruce a Nado Internacional, between Cardona Island and Parque Enrique González, the family-friendly Encuentro Playero, held on the weekend before Labor Day, and monthly Noches de Placita entertainment events at Plaza 65 de Infantería.

Previous Planning
A proposal to create a Historic District in 1962 included the LPC and Avenida Hostos from La Playa to the Ponce City Center. Although the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture designated the City Center as a “Zona Historica” with historic preservation regulations, the LPC and Avenida Hostos were not included. In 2008-2010, the City prepared an area plan for the LPC and Avenida Hostos stretching to just north of Avenida Las Americas in the Ponce City Center. The 2010 study elaborated on the 1962 effort to establish a historic preservation district and noted that in the intervening years some historic structures had been demolished and others significantly altered.

La Playa Center Today
Predominantly organized in a grid of orthogonal blocks, LPC is a commercial center with other land uses at its edges. It can be divided into several zones for planning purposes: Waterfront, Historic Commercial Center, Villa Pesquera District, Puerto Viejo Neighborhood, and Gateway (Avenida Hostos) (Map 2). The public realm is generally characterized by a high percentage of impervious surfaces, very narrow sidewalks, few street trees, and occasional wide parking curb cuts without sidewalks, such as at the US Customs site on Calle Bonaire adjacent to Enrique González park.


3 Municipio de Ponce, PLAN DE ÁREA DE LOS SECTORES: LA PLAYA Y LA AVENIDA HOSTOS, 2010
The Waterfront
The LPC waterfront is mostly publicly owned, but also has a few private properties. The public properties are the Maritime Police station and boat ramp; U.S. Customs Facilities; two parks, Plaza de 65 Infantería, and Parque Enrique González directly on the waterfront and a third park, Parque Mosca, located just east of the Maritime Police facilities but accessed inland from the waterfront; and small parking areas by U.S. Customs and the parks. Private properties include two restaurants, El Ancla and Bahías, in historic buildings. Parque Enrique González functions as La Playa’s “malecón” or waterfront esplanade, with mosaic steps down to the water.

Events and activities that take place at the waterfront include Cruce a Nado, an international swimming competition started in 1980 over the 1.5 nautical miles from Isla Cardona to Parque Enrique González. Since 2019, monthly evening entertainment events, Noches de Placita, with food, music and art take place at Plaza 65 de Infantería.

The Commercial Center
• **Historic Warehouse District.** Characteristics of this district are:
  o Long east-west streets Calle Comercio Playa, Calle Bonaire, Calle Salmon, Calle Morena
  o Short north-south streets Calle Ramon R. Velez, Calle Este, Calle Oliver Aduana, and Avenida Hostos
  o Rectangular blocks 140 m x 50 m on average.
  o A block of warehouses on Calle Bonaire faces Parque Enrique González on the waterfront. That block includes the Casa del Veterano in a former warehouse. The building remains heavily damaged from Hurricane Maria with an estimated rehabilitation cost of $90 million. In addition to veterans’ activities, the Casa has served as a center for community activities.  
  o La Playa historic structures have not been subject to historic district requirements and have been modified to meet the needs of new users, especially in the interior of buildings. However, in many cases traditional treatment of the simple warehouse buildings with colorful paint and trim has persisted.

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4 “Al rescate de devastada Casa del Veterano de la Playa de Ponce,” El Sol, October 20, 2020. periodicoelsolpr.com/2020/10/20/al-rescate-de-devastada-casa-del-veterano-de-la-playa-de-ponce/
Villa Pesquera District.
- The fishing village long at the mouth of the Rio Portugués was reorganized in 1992 to include a city-owned building staffed by a fishermen’s cooperative where fish is for sale, a restaurant, and moorings for fishing boats. We understand that approximately 54 Fishermen are active, but the Rio Portugués requires repeated dredging to deal with sedimentation that blocks the river and interferes with passage on the river and into the sea. East of the Villa Pesquera there are approximately two residential blocks. A small number of residential buildings are scattered elsewhere in LPC in a few locations. These houses show the typical “casa criolla” style of elevated wooden houses with zinc roofs and front porches. The traditional elevation above the street is designed to keep out flood waters and enhance air circulation.

- Mixed-Use Corridor.
  - Avenida Padre Noel includes homes as well as small-scale commerce, with some businesses located in residential buildings.

- Gateway Commercial Corridor.
  - Avenida Hostos is a commercial corridor that connects the waterfront to the Ponce city center. The segment that can serve as a gateway to the LPC begins at Route 52 and stretches to Avenida Padre Noel. Although this corridor includes one of the listed historic sites, the 1908 Methodist Church, it otherwise has few buildings with historic character.

- The Puerto Viejo Neighborhood.
  - Puerto Viejo, a low-income barrio at the eastern edge of LPC grew organically and somewhat haphazardly along extensions of the street grid and following pedestrian paths, probably as an informal settlement some years ago. The neighborhood is subject to repeated flooding and suffered significant damage from Hurricane Maria. Many residents were refused FEMA assistance because they did not have clean title to their properties, and many left the neighborhood. According to community leaders, the neighborhood has been losing population and is increasingly made up of older people. The current population is estimated at 100 households. Because of poor connections to the rest of the area, they fear that if there were a tsunami, they could not evacuate.5

A Vision for La Playa Center
La Playa de Ponce’s center will be a vibrant commercial and cultural district on Ponce’s waterfront, representing La Playa’s history and cultural roots, its contemporary cultural and artistic expression, and its commitment to urban sustainability and resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Take some actions right away.
- Take inventory of the buildings and structures in the Historic Warehouse District to identify current conditions. (The 2010 study shows conditions as of 2008.)
- Create a façade program for repair and painting of vacant warehouse exterior walls to reduce the appearance of vacancy and abandonment.
- Organize and implement another round of mural painting for warehouse walls.

Organize the commercial district.
- Create a Business Association or Main Street District, using the 40-year successful model of the Main Street program.6 Build on existing organizations such as the organizing committee for the Carnaval de Vejigantes and the coalition of civic organizations called La Playa Reverdece. Sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Main Street approach is based on active organization by district stakeholders and is organized around five points:
  - Economic Vitality: Build a diverse economic base; catalyze smart new investment; cultivate a strong entrepreneurship ecosystem
  - Leadership: Build leadership and strong organizational capacity; ensure broad community engagement; forge partnerships across sectors
  - Design: Create an inviting, inclusive atmosphere; celebrate historic character; foster accessible, people-centered public spaces
  - Promotion: Market the district’s defining assets; communicate unique features through storytelling; support buy-local experience
  - Management: Hire a person to serve as a director for the district to work with stakeholders, organize meetings and events, promote the district, and seek funding through grants and other sources.

Strengthen the arts and culture economy.
- Build on the existing artistic and cultural identity of La Playa to create a long-term sustainable creative economy. In addition to a Main Street-style and civic organizations mentioned above, residents of La Playa as a whole should be included in a long-term advisory group.
- The Inter-American Development Bank published a guidebook with best practices and case studies from around the world: Creative and Cultural Industries in Urban Revitalization: A Practice Based Handbook.7 The handbook provides guidelines for culture-based urban revitalization and case studies. Key guidelines relevant to the urban center of La Playa include:
  - Develop a strategic vision and plan to set a long-term vision and direction to integrate infrastructure and cultural, creative and heritage elements.
  - Create or modify legislation to establish and fund projects. As appropriate, change zoning or other planning rules, such as historic preservation programs, to support the cultural economy. Consider creating a “Cultural District” and a “Cultural Corridor” for La Playa in the historic center and the Avenida Hostos Gateway. Identifying the Cultural District with a logo, signage, street banners, and so on will help create a sense of place and identity.
  - Seek a range of funding resources from multiple levels of government, indirect government funding (such as tax incentives), and non-profits and foundations. In addition to funds to establish projects and programs, it is important to keep in mind the need for operational funding, both from stakeholders and government. Private sector groups that could benefit from a livelier LPC, such as businesses in the hospitality sector, should be approached as sponsors.
  - Create new and improved public spaces. In La Playa, major waterfront public spaces, Parque Enrique González and Plaza 65 de Infantería need redesign and integration with the waterfront multiuse path recommended in the Open Space section of this report. (A new conceptional design for Parque Enrique González has recently been developed.) Streets are also public spaces, and creative pedestrian friendly improvements should be designed for the narrow streets of the Warehouse District, and for the Avenida Hostos gateways.

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6 https://www.mainstreet.org/home
o Make the LCP digital-friendly with free Wi-Fi throughout, or at least in the commercial area.
o Develop some form of public transportation from the city center, La Guancha, and other appropriate locations to bring more people to LPC and reduce the need for parking.
o Support housing rehabilitation and affordable housing, especially in Puerto Viejo.
o Identify and attract cultural or arts “anchors” for historic warehouse buildings in prominent locations, such as on the waterfront and near public spaces.
o Create incubator spaces for artists, artisans, food businesses, and other culture and arts entrepreneurs in warehouse buildings.
o Develop a consistent year-round program of cultural and artistic events working with La Playa artists and artisans and collaborating with Ponce’s museums and other arts and cultural organizations.
o Monitor and evaluate the arts and culture initiative and its impact on the community as it develops to allow for change and improvement.

Preserve historic character.
● Preserve external features and overall form of historic buildings.
o Develop and adopt an ordinance that promotes conservation of historic exterior features by 1) defining the buildings subject to the ordinance; 2) providing guidelines and basic review. This would not be a historic district requiring adherence to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. Rather, it would create guidelines, which could be voluntary or required, for certain building elements that should be preserved for historic character. Development of the ordinance should include consultation with property- and business-owners to agree on the district boundaries, the building elements to be preserved, and the mechanism for review and, if mandatory, enforcement. In some municipalities, similar systems are called neighborhood conservation districts.

● Reconstruct the Casa del Veterano.
o Heavily damaged by Hurricane Maria, the Casa del Veterano not only is a former warehouse in a prominent location across from Parque Enrique González, but it is also exceptionally important because of its role as a community resource for meetings and programs.

Make LPC a model of sustainability and resilience in Ponce.
● Develop a program to floodproof buildings.
o Raise floors or whole structures, as appropriate. Raising the floors of the high-ceilinged historic warehouses can be part of the flood-proofing strategy for these buildings. Many traditional residential buildings are already elevated, sometimes only a few feet above the street, but in other cases with all living space confined to a second floor. However, in Puerto Viejo and other residential areas, many houses are not elevated or elevated sufficiently.

● Mitigate the urban heat island effect.
o Provide elements such as awnings, shade sails, trees in interior courtyards (with water features), white (high albedo–reflective) roofs and so on.
o Provide more green elements in public spaces and decrease hardscape, including planting street trees where feasible, such as at intersections or in planters.

● Use green infrastructure to reduce stormwater runoff.
o Where feasible, plant canopy trees and install rain gardens, bioswales, and permeable surfaces to reduce the amount and velocity of runoff and increase infiltration. See the report sections on infrastructure and open space.

● Create a renewable energy district.
o Provide incentives to install solar panels and use high performance air conditioners.

Execute a Community Master Plan for Puerto Viejo.
● Create a Puerto Viejo Advisory Committee of stakeholders.
● Inventory sites, buildings, lots, and streets in Puerto Viejo for conditions and risk issues, such as infrastructure, circulation, flooding, land titles, and vacancies.
● Work with residents on issues such as rehabilitation, relocation, safety, connections to the commercial center, employment and self-employment, and so on, including individual case management as needed.
● Identify nearby vacant land for potential new residences.
● Create a program to regularize titles.
● Develop and implement a master plan for Puerto Viejo.
La Playa’s basic infrastructure is lacking in several ways, which causes day-to-day hardships for local residents and hampers economic development. We recommend the following infrastructure improvements to address these problems:

- **Flooding and Storm Drainage.** The boundaries of La Playa are defined in part by the water surrounding it, not only with the Caribbean Sea to the south but through three rivers. Río Bucaná is situated on the east side of the district, Río Matilde runs along the western edge of the district, and Río Portugués runs through the center of the district. Since La Playa experiences both storm surges from the Caribbean as well as flooding along all three rivers, flooding occurs across La Playa not only during hurricanes but also during heavy rains. Virtually all of La Playa is in a FEMA mapped Special Flood Hazard Area (100-year flood zone) with base flood elevation of 2.2m (Map 3). It’s not clear what proportion of this risk is attributable to hurricane storm surge as opposed to riverine flooding from upstream. According to city staff, some parts of La Playa are below sea level, which makes them highly vulnerable to frequent flooding. Notably, all of the port, La Guancha, and Enrique González Park, are all built on filled land. Given the low elevations, much of La Playa experiences localized flooding many times each year, and, due to broken stormwater and sewage pipes, this frequent flooding is often mixed with sewage.

The problems of flooding—and contaminated flooding—can be alleviated in several ways. Storm drainage improvements can reduce the frequency and extent of local flooding, and sanitary sewer improvements can reduce pollution. Improving the reliability of pump stations can further alleviate local peak flood levels. Upstream watershed improvements and better use of natural open spaces can reduce the peak flows entering La Playa after rains. And various forms of adaptation, such as elevated floors, can make it easier for residents and businesses to be resilient to frequent low-level flood events.
The following localized improvements and programs could help to address flooding in La Playa:

- Implement a regular program of cleaning and maintenance for existing storm drains, combined with a local advocacy campaign to encourage neighborhood residents to monitor their nearest storm drain may address issues at the drain site.
- Conduct a study of portions of La Playa that lack existing storm drains, and construct new storm drains where needed.
- Incorporate infiltration systems into existing paved areas to support improved drainage during heavy rains.
- Improve storm drainage in Avenida Padre Noel, which is one of the primary connections over Rio Portugués. A 2020 study of flood hazard mitigation strategies along Avenida Padre Noel suggests that parts of this street can see as much as two feet of flooding during regular flood events. The study recommended a regular street maintenance program to prevent potential stormwater drain blockages, as well as incorporating drainage systems into the bridge over Rio Portugués. We understand that some of these improvements are in process.
- Rehabilitate and enhance maintenance of pump stations, to address on-going power failures and damage from natural disasters that prevents the pumps from effectively removing flood waters from the street. Improved reliability of the electrical power system, possibly including backup generators, would allow the pumps to more effectively minimize local flooding.
- Assess and repair the sanitary sewer system to minimize infiltration of rain and flood waters into sanitary sewer pipes, thereby reducing existing overflow problems that can lead to sewage effluent entering directly into, streets, rivers, and the sea.

Watershed-scale flood improvements would also address flooding in La Playa. Run-off from central Ponce flowing toward the sea drives flooding in La Playa, so the following solutions that address flood mitigation at a watershed level would help to prevent damage to the community:

- Draft land-use policy to prevent development in wetland areas so that wetlands can serve as water retention areas.
- Redesign existing parks and green spaces such as Enrique González Park and Parque Lineal Veredas del Labrador to support flood control by providing both retention and infiltration.
- Identify, protect and possibly purchase specific floodwater retention sites, which could be developed as new parks, open spaces, and natural resource areas. Existing open spaces adjacent to Río Matilde and Río Portugués in La Playa are potential candidates, as are numerous lands throughout Ponce.
- Consider dredging at the mouths of the rivers, particularly Río Portugués, so as to increase drainage capacity, although dredging can be expensive and may only provide temporary relief before new silt builds up.

It is worth noting that current FEMA policy allows applicants for flood mitigation funds to quantify ecosystem service benefits, or benefits to the natural environment and human populations, in cost-benefit analyses. These can include benefits such as water filtration, air quality improvements, and creating recreation spaces.

Finally, the local building stock should be designed and redesigned with flooding in mind. New buildings need to be built above calculated flood water elevations, and the Municipality can also assist the owners of existing buildings to raise their floors above flood levels. In particular, the old warehouses in the historic center could have new floors installed that would allow for flood-safe adaptive reuse.

**Transportation Connections.** Because of the layout of Ponce’s street grid and highway system, La Playa has only minimal connections to the rest of Ponce (Map 4). The Luis A. Ferré Expressway (PR-52) bounds La Playa to the north, and few roads connect across the Expressway from La Playa to the rest of the city. Historically, La Playa had an electric tramway system that provided transit access up Avenida Hostos to central Ponce, but this service has long been discontinued. Several potential investments in transportation infrastructure would help local residents to access their own neighborhood and adjacent neighborhoods in Ponce more quickly:

- The existing access from Avenida Santiago de los Caballeros (PR-12) into La Playa is in poor repair and floods frequently. Calle Puerto Viejo, which connects Puerto Viejo to PR-12, is currently a two-lane road with no pedestrian infrastructure. Several sections are also in need of repaving. This road is an essential access point to the eastern side of Puerto Viejo, and improvements to this road could provide drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists living in this area with significantly improved access to other parts of the neighborhood and the rest of Ponce.
- Intersection improvements are also needed between PR-12 and both Calle Puerto Viejo and Villa del Carmen, both of which have only right in / right out access today. Enhancing these intersections with overpasses that enable left turns both in and out would greatly increase access for residents of both Puerto Viejo and Villa del Carmen.
- As noted above, the community needs a pedestrian and bicycle connection from La Guancha to the rest of La Playa, with a pedestrian / bicycle trail through wetland and open space areas, across PR-12, and along (but separated from) appropriate roadways. At present there is no dedicated pedestrian or bicycle access across PR-12 to connect the historic center with La Guancha; adding such access would be an important improvement for La Playa residents. This should also include a
pedestrian and bicycle connection to the Hilton Ponce Resort, which would improve tourist access to both La Guancha and the La Playa Center.

- Callejon del Río is a north-south road through the Salistral neighborhood of La Playa that currently ends at the Expressway. Aerial photos show a footpath used by pedestrians to walk from the end of Callejon del Río under the Expressway toward downtown Ponce. This indicates a desire for residents of the area to have more direct access from their neighborhoods to the rest of the city. Exploring and investing in opportunities to increase connections across the Expressway for Playeros, such as pedestrian bridges over the Expressway, may improve the quality of life for these residents.

- While the Expressway may be a physical barrier in some parts of La Playa, it also provides an important connection to other parts of Ponce and other highways across the island. However, La Playa has few on-ramps or off-ramps to the Expressway, which can be a challenge particularly for residents of the western neighborhoods of La Playa. Adding an on-ramp and off-ramp at Avenida Hostos, for example, would provide La Playa’s residents with faster and easier access to commercial areas, employment centers and education opportunities throughout the city.

- Improving non-auto access along Avenida Hostos between La Playa and the center of Ponce would benefit residents of La Playa and central Ponce, as well as tourists seeking to experience the cultural attractions in both places. This could consist of bicycle and pedestrian improvements, as well as a shuttle bus.

- **Neighborhood-Scale Infrastructure.** Filling gaps in the network of neighborhood-scale infrastructure, such as green spaces, sidewalks, and bike paths, can help to further improve the quality of life for Playeros. Green spaces such as parks, road medians planted with native species, and street trees can provide a pleasing visual experience and shade, while also helping to mitigate regular flooding by increasing the amount of permeable ground in the neighborhood.

Small-scale transportation infrastructure projects can also significantly improve quality of life in the neighborhoods. While La Playa has sidewalks along many of its main roads, some gaps exist, such as along Calle Puerto Viejo. Some existing sidewalks are also in need of repair or replacement, such as in places where plants are overgrown and have cracked the pavement. Repairing and completing the network of sidewalk facilities can improve pedestrian safety and comfort.
Similarly, identifying key pieces of the road network in La Playa and developing a network of bike infrastructure can reduce some residents’ transportation costs for short trips within the neighborhood by providing an alternative to driving, while also reducing the need for parking in areas like the Historic Center. Making cycling a safe transportation option in La Playa can also have public health benefits, as cycling is a low-impact, low-cost form of exercise.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE
This section of the CPAT report focuses on creating a connected system of green spaces, particularly along the waterfront, and enhancing sustainability and resilience through green infrastructure. For additional community benefits, La Playa needs to develop and implement an open space and recreation plan integrated with planning for housing, infrastructure, the environment, and other aspects of community life.

Public open spaces
La Playa has eight existing public open spaces (Map 4): the Enrique González Park and La Plaza 65 de Infantería in the historic center; the La Moca neighborhood park near the Puerto Viejo neighborhood; two active recreation parks (Parque Lucy Grillasca, and the Vistas Del Mar recreation area) in the western part of La Playa; a large recreation area at Parque Villa del Carmen (including a skatepark) at the center of the Villa del Carmen neighborhood; La Guancha boardwalk and park; and a linear park along Río Bucaná at the eastern boundary of La Playa de Ponce. Just outside La Playa, across Río Bucaná, is a ninth open space, Parque Monagas, a 125-acre park, which has been closed since suffering extensive damage in Hurricane Maria. Ideally, every resident should have access to a park or open space within a ten-minute walk.

Public coastal resources include the La Guancha beach and the beach along the coast from Río Portugués to Avenida Eduardo Ruberte, known as Ponce Playa. The two parks in the historic center are also located on or adjacent to the coast, and there are also other publicly-owned facilities on the coast, such as the Maritime Police and the customs house.

Urban forest resources
The urban forest in La Playa is mostly on private property, often in backyards and interior courtyards in urbanized areas. As an older area with narrow streets and many properties surrounded by walls and fences, La Playa does not have many street trees. Most public parks and plazas have few trees. However, the banks of Río Portugués, Río Matilde, and Río Bucaná are vegetated and forested. In addition, large vegetated and forested private properties lie inland east and west of Avenida Hostos, and south of Villa del Carmen.

Community green initiatives
In recent years, the Playero community has come together to improve La Playa’s environment and the revitalization of La Playa de Ponce through two organizations, La Playa Reverdece (Regreen La Playa) and Nuevo Amanecer (New Dawn). Local La Playa organizations participating in La Playa Reverdece range from the organizing committee for the Carnaval de Vejigantes to the Cruce a Nado international swimming event. The Institute for Socio-Ecological Research, through Proyecto ISER Caribe has partnered with La Playa groups for environmental education, identification of sources of coastal pollution, and mitigation projects. Coastal cleanups and monitoring, planting of 1000 trees along the coast, installation of green infrastructure in the form of a rain garden in an alley across from Parque Enrique González, and environmental education are major aspects of these community efforts. Unfortunately, rain gardens need maintenance to keep them clean and weeded, and this installation has not been maintained. After a pilot tree planting project in Villa Pesquera, a larger program was completed in coastal locations in December 2020.

A Green Vision for La Playa’s Open Space
La Playa de Ponce will be a model of urban ecological values through a connected network of green, sustainable, and resilient parks and open spaces for the enjoyment and health of playeros and for visitors from the city, the region, the island, and beyond.

Open Space Recommendations
Make continuous waterfront connections from Río Bucaná to Río Matilde.

- Design and implement a multiuse path with pervious surfaces directly along the waterfront when feasible and with on-road connections as needed. Potential connections for this route could include:
  - Rehabilitate the multiuse path, Parque Lineal Veredas del Labrador, along the Río Bucaná from Parque Monagas to connect to a coastal path from the mouth of the river to the La Guancha boardwalk and the Hilton Ponce resort.
  - Build a bicycle/pedestrian bridge connecting Parque Monagas to the Parque Lineal on the western side of the Bucaná River.
  - Create a multiuse path connection from La Guancha to Parque Enrique González in the La Playa Center. This connection would have to navigate route 12, Route 123, and Calle Puerto Viejo to pass through the port area and make a detour through the Puerto Viejo neighborhood. A separated lane for pedestrians and bikes, with trees planted alongside, would protect them from port traffic. A pedestrian/bike crossing in the area north of the drainage canal where Calle Puerto Viejo begins would...
provide a more direct connection to Calle Salmon in the La Playa Center.

- Continue through Parque Enrique González with on-street connections to Plaza 65 de Infantería, Calle Arias, Villa Pesquera, and crossing the Río Portugués at Avenida Padre Noel.
- After the bridge, use Calle Principal to Ponce Playa and continue the path along the beach to an on-street route along Avenida Los Meros.
- Develop a path along Avenida Monatí and Río Matilde. This could also be combined with natural floodwater management designs in this area.
- Develop on-road routes north and east inland, connecting to the Vistas del Mar Recreation Area and Parque Lucy Grillasca to circle back to Avenida Padre Noel and the waterfront path in LPC.

Redesign, improve, and maintain existing parks.

- Reference the conceptual design exists for Parque Enrique González with FEMA funding.
- Consider conserving some of the mosaics created in community workshops for the existing park.
- Reduce impervious surfaces and add shade trees.

- Redesign Plaza 65 de Infantería for resilience.
- Consider acquiring the historic but damaged warehouse property with a vegetated courtyard across Avenida Hostos to extend the Plaza for community activities.
- Improve the parking area across Calle Bonaire with vegetated and pervious parking spaces on the waterfront.
- Improve Parque La Moca for neighborhood use, including access to the water.

Resilience benefits of living shoreline. [Link to NOAA factsheet](https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/living-shoreline.html)
● Redesign and improve active recreation neighborhood parks to provide more varied green elements and improved active spaces: Vistas del Mar Recreation Area, Parque Lucy Grillasco, and Parque Villa Carmen.

● Rehabilitate and reopen Park Monagas and build a bike and pedestrian bridge to the Parque Lineal path on the west bank of Río Bucaná.

● Establish “friends” groups of volunteers, for example, a Friends of Parque Enrique González group, to assist the City in supporting and maintaining parks.

**Design parks and park connections to be more sustainable and resilient.**

● Reduce impervious surfaces and create more vegetated green space.

● Reduce the amount of hardscape and, where it is used, use pervious surfaces.

● Establish green infrastructure elements in parks and vacant lots.
  o Design parks to serve as stormwater parks that detain stormwater and release it gradually during rainstorms.
  o Install rain gardens and bioswales.
  o Reduce the urban heat island effect by planting more shade trees rather than palm trees in parks.

● Plant shade trees along public streets where feasible, giving priority to pedestrian routes that connect neighborhood destinations. Distribute shade trees to property owners willing to care for them to plant in their frontage where the tree will shade the sidewalk.

● Create a green infrastructure workforce development program for youth to train and pay them to maintain green infrastructure.

**Expand public property along the La Playa coastline.**

● Acquire vacant properties on the south side (waterside) of Avenida Los Meros for passive public coastal open space and creation of living shorelines. Encourage and assist private owners on the waterside of Avenida Los Meros to install living shorelines on their property.

**Install living shorelines.**

● Develop and implement a program to install living shorelines at all public coastal areas, where feasible. The conceptual design for Parque Enrique González incorporates narrow living shorelines.

● According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Living shorelines connect the land and water to stabilize the shoreline, reduce erosion, and provide ecosystem services, like valuable habitat, that enhances coastal resilience.” Proyecto ISER Caribe has recommended planting vegetation along the coastline to mitigate pollution coming from the rivers and stormwater.
APPENDIX A: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- Domingo Rodríguez (Club Cruce a Nado)
- José Quirindongo (Fishing Association)
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- Allan Cintrón (Med Centro)
- Chelymar Rodríguez Limardo (College Student)

Neighborhood Community Leaders
- Moisés Mercado (Villa Tabaiba Community)
- Miriam Robles (Puerto Viejo Community)
- Mirna Vélez (Salistral Community)
- Beatriz Riefkohl (Paseo del Puerto Community)

Cultural Events & Artists
- Denisse Rodríguez (Traditional Comparsa Group (Vejigan-tes) /
- Gilberto Limardo (Community Leader, Community Art and Cultural Workshop, In charge of coordination of La Playa Annual Carnaval)
- Diógenes Ballester (International Artist)

Local Business Owners and Property Owners
- Ramón Figueroa (Colmado Figueroa (Local Supermarket)
- Julio César Ramos (Cesar Restaurant (Local Business)
- Frances Torruella
- Lucemy Velázquez
- David Maldonado

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- Orlando A. Borrás Serrano, UPR
- Jan M. Melendez Garcia, PUCPR
- Thalia Escobar Rivera, PUCPR

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