

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 27, 2026

Matthew Welbes
Executive Director
Federal Transit Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Executive Director Welbes:

We are writing to you to bring to your attention a draft regulation¹ that was prepared by Puerto Rico's Integrated Transportation Authority (PRITA) to drastically increase passenger and freight fares of the Puerto Rico Ferry route between Ceiba and the Island Municipalities of Vieques and Culebra. If approved, this fee structure would turn a round trip of \$4 (Vieques) and \$4.50 (Culebra) for an adult into one of \$22.50, representing increases of 462 and 400 percent, respectively. We are concerned that, with this change, PRITA may be violating federal regulations related to the grants and awards it has received from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). In addition, we have heard from our constituents that this regulation has not undergone the processes required by local law to provide the public ample opportunity to comment or make recommendations.

As you may be aware, the PRHTA manages the only public transportation method that connects Vieques and Culebra with the mainland of Puerto Rico (Island Service) through its private operator, HMS Ferries, Inc. As such, the Authority owns and the private operator administers at least four FTA-funded vessels: Cayo Largo, Cayo Blanco, Santa María, and Isla Bonita.² The PRHTA, with PRITA as a subrecipient, was also awarded \$11.9 million in 2024 under the Formula Grants for Rural Areas program to acquire a new passenger vessel for the Island Service.³ This funding is tied to certain objectives and legal requirements that the proposed ferry fares may be contradicting. First, PRHTA proposed to increase passenger flow between Ceiba, Vieques and Culebra by acquiring this vessel. However, increasing each ferry trip from \$2.25 to \$10 would reduce the number of annual passengers from 1,170,153 (ridership in 2015) to 558,580, representing a 52.26 percent reduction.⁴ And this may be an underestimate,

¹ *Reglamento de Tarifas para los Servicios Ofrecidos en los Terminales Marítimos del Programa Marítimo de la Autoridad de Transporte Integrado de Puerto Rico*, AUTOR. DE TRANSPORTE INTEGRADO DE P.R. (2025), <http://app.estado.gobierno.pr/ReglamentosOnLine/Reglamentos/9682.pdf>

² Fed. Transit Admin., *PRHTA Application*, U.S. DEP'T OF TRANSP., https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/olms/regs/compliance/DSP/2024/09sep/PR-2024-041-00_PUERTO_RICO_HIGHWAY_AND_TRANSPORTATION_AUTHORITY.pdf

³ *PR-2024-041 Formula Grant*, HIGHERGOV, <https://www.highergov.com/grant/PR-2024-041/>

⁴ Nelson R. Torres Martínez, Esq., *INFORME DEL OFICIAL EXAMINADOR SOBRE CAMBIOS PROPUESTOS A LAS TARIFAS DE TRANSPORTE MARÍTIMO*, AUTORIDAD DE TRANSPORTE MARÍTIMO (2018).

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given the calculation was made over ten years ago, and the proposed fare is not \$10, but \$11.25 per one-way trip.

Another problematic aspect of the proposed fare is that it would not be applied uniformly to all ferry passengers, as Puerto Ricans living in Vieques and Culebra would receive a significant discount, while anyone traveling from other municipality would be forced to pay full price. It is outlined in FTA's Master Agreement⁵ that no person in the United States shall be excluded from participation in or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance, pursuant to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁶ Further, the Department of Transportation's (DOT) regulation^{7,8} implementing this provision establishes that restricting a person in any way from the enjoyment of any advantage or privilege enjoyed by others receiving a service under a program, is discriminatory.⁹

Such discriminatory action will have real-life consequences for all those Puerto Ricans who, although do not reside in Vieques or Culebra, travel to these islands daily or several times a week to work, do business, or visit their families. In 2018, Puerto Rico's Maritime Transportation Authority's (MTA) own hearing officer issued a positive report on the increases to ferry fares, but subject to the adoption of a series of recommendations to protect these passenger categories. The report also documents residents' concerns about the negative impacts these changes could have on domestic tourism and disaster response. Higher transportation costs could dissuade other Puerto Ricans from visiting the islands, impacting the revenues of stores, restaurants, hotels, among others. As it is, businesses face significant barriers to stay afloat, like unreliable electricity, high importation costs, and labor shortages. During disasters, the islands may receive less volunteer aid, which will automatically put more lives at risk. MTA's hearing officer also made recommendations regarding the modernization of the systems that would be used to classify residents and non-residents. None of these concerns seem to have been considered by the Puerto Rican government in its draft regulation.

The apparent dismissal of these comments aligns with the opaqueness that has characterized the potential approval of this regulation. Despite the existence of multiple state-level laws^{10,11} designed to engage citizens in changes to rates of essential services—such as ferry

⁵ *Master Agreement*, FED. TRANSIT ADMIN., U.S. DEP'T OF TRANSP. (May. 2, 2024), <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2024-05/FTA-Master-Agreement-v31-05-02-2024.pdf>

⁶ 42 U.S.C. § 2000d *et seq.*

⁷ 49 C.F.R pt. 21

⁸ 49 C.F.R § 21.1

⁹ 49 C.F.R § 21.5 (b)(1)

¹⁰ Ley Uniforme para la Revisión y Modificación de Tarifas, Ley Núm. 21 de 31 de mayo de 1985, 27 L.P.R.A. § 261 (1985); Ley de Procedimiento Administrativo Uniforme del Gobierno de Puerto Rico, Ley Núm. 38 de 30 de junio de 2017, 3 L.P.R.A. § 9601 (2017); and Ley del Fondo Permanente para la Preservación Ambiental de Culebra y Vieques, Ley Núm. 293 de 15 de septiembre de 2004, 12 L.P.R.A. § 1161 note (2004).

¹¹ Act No. 21 of 1985 seeks to ensure that users and customers have access to adequate and uniform administrative procedures for the review and adjustment of fares. It provides that any governmental entity offering essential public services may not modify its fares without first holding public hearings presided over by an official examiner with

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transportation—PRITA has acted unilaterally. In fact, the only instance in which state law exempts an agency from holding hearings before changing an essential service’s rate is when it is required to do so by federal requirements.¹² Based on the available information, it is not evident that the FTA has required PRITA to implement fare increases of this magnitude, particularly given the impact on low-income and disadvantaged residents of Puerto Rico.

Given the concerns raised, and considering that PRITA expects the fare increases to go into effect next Wednesday, April 1,¹³ we urge you to answer the following questions no later than Tuesday, March 31st:

1. Was your agency properly informed about the proposed regulation? Are you aware of any recent analyses or projections that PRITA has shared regarding the proposed changes?
2. Has the FTA imposed any new obligation on the PRTHA or PRITA that requires these agencies to quadruple the ferry service fares for passengers and cargo?
3. Can you confirm that the cited increases are in compliance with all federal requirements that your agency has imposed on the PRTHA and the PRITA, including any anti-discrimination clauses?
4. As a recipient of Section 5311 grants, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is required to submit an annual report to the FTA that contains information on capital investment, operations, and services provided with such funds. This information includes total annual revenue, sources of revenue, total annual operating costs, total annual capital costs, fleet size and type and related facilities, vehicle revenue miles, and ridership.¹⁴ Please share the latest annual report submitted by the recipient, including any details on how the revenue from the proposed increases is expected to be spent.
5. Can you confirm whether the PRHTA or the PRITA have used Section 5311 funds to research ways to promote the effective delivery of public transportation in Vieques and Culebra,¹⁵ including efforts to modernize the ferry ticketing system?

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. We urge you to act without delay to ensure full transparency in decisions that directly affect the sole reliable means of transportation for thousands of Puerto Ricans and the stability of their communities.

expertise in the agency’s fee structure. The Act also requires the publication of a report containing the hearing’s conclusions and the examiner’s recommendations, and it establishes procedures for the consideration of public comments. Act No. 38 of 2017 establishes a uniform judicial process for reviewing actions taken by governmental agencies, whether through the adoption of regulations or the adjudication of cases. Act No. 293 of 2004 creates a Permanent Fund for the preservation of Culebra and Vieques, financed through a fee imposed on ferry services. The Act exempts residents and bona fide merchants from this fee and defines the permissible uses of the funds.

¹² *Ibid.*

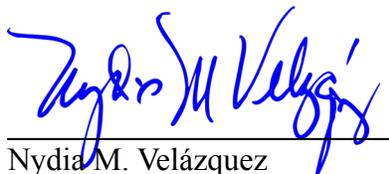
¹³ Andrea Cruz, *Con fecha aumento de tarifa de lanchas para las islas municipio*, EL VOCERO (Mar. 20, 2026). https://www.elvocero.com/gobierno/municipal/con-fecha-aumento-de-tarifa-de-lanchas-para-las-islas-municipio/article_461496e7-5459-40cf-9797-f0c3f94a80c8.html

¹⁴ 49 U.S.C 5311 § (b)(4)

¹⁵ 49 U.S.C 5311 § (e)

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Sincerely,



Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress



Dan Goldman
Member of Congress



Delia C. Ramirez
Member of Congress



Pablo José Hernández
Member of Congress



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress