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Bulacan Aerotropolis Project: Goodbye birds, hello big metal birds

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A black-faced spoonbill. More than 20 of this endangered species were spotted in Barangay Taliptip, Bulakan, Bulacan, on January 11.

With the proposed construction of the P735.6-billion New Manila International Airport (NMIA), people in the municipality of Bulakan and nearby towns in the province of Bulacan will soon be seeing more airplanes flying in the sky.

The project, secured through an unsolicited proposal by the Ramon Ang-led conglomerate San Miguel Corp. (SMC), hopes to ease air and land traffic congestion in Pasay City, where the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (Naia) is situated.



Flocks of birds cover islets on Taliptip River in Bulakan, Bulacan.

To be constructed in a 2,500-hectare coastal fishpond in Bulakan, Bulacan, that is about 35 kilometers north of Manila, the aerotropolis will stretch from Taliptip River Stream in Barangay Taliptip, Bulakan, to Sitio Baluarte in Obando town.

The project will include a modern passenger terminal building with airside and landside facilities, as well as an airport toll road and railway.

Needless to say, the national government is bent on pursuing the project, with the economic benefits of a new airport in mind—investors coming in, setting up shops triggering construction boom and generating more jobs and livelihood opportunities.

Recovery effort contribution

Despite the enormous challenge posed by the current coronavirus pandemic, SMC is committed to pursuing the ambitious project to help the government in its economic

recovery efforts. This was disclosed during the company's stockholders' meeting early this month.

Quoted in news reports, SMC Chief Finance Officer Ferdinand K. Constantino said part of the company's recovery plan is continuing with expansion plans as previously laid out, which include the plan to build the airport.

Constantino remains optimistic that while the company faces challenges because of the pandemic, it remains in good shape.

In a statement in July 2019, SMC said the NMIA project, "will be our largest contribution to the Philippine economy thus far. It's a project that will benefit not just us today, but many future generations of Filipinos."



Birds form a line as they rest on a mangrove area in Barangay Dapdap, Taliptip, Bulakan, in January.

"It will generate about a million jobs and jump-start economic growth in Bulacan and neighboring provinces. Apart from improving tourism and addressing congestion problems, it will boost small local industries, manufacturing, exports and possibly give rise to new ones. We are committed to helping the government deliver on our nation's goals and helping the local communities thrive and improve their quality of life," SMC said.

Opposition

Like any other environmentally critical project, the Bulacan Aerotropolis is facing stiff opposition from various sectors. Environmentalists, fishermen and conservation advocates included.

While many fishpond owners in Barangay Taliptip have already sold their properties, and most of farm tenants have already agreed to self-demolish their homes as part of an agreement with the project proponents, still, some residents are up in arms, and they are getting help from various environmental groups and conservation advocates.

Oceana Philippines, an ocean conservation advocacy nongovernment organization, has expressed alarm on the stories of fisherfolk residents in Barangay Taliptip as they suffer even more during the pandemic.

Importance of Manila Bay

During the launch of the Save Manila Bay web site on June 27 which coincided with the forum dubbed “Habang May Dagat, May Buhay: Dissecting the Impacts of the Proposed Bulacan Airport,” retired Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio underscored the importance of Manila Bay.

Carpio believes that the airport project in Bulakan, Bulacan, will require massive land reclamation, which will further cause the deterioration of Manila Bay and destroy a major fish source in Luzon.

Many areas along Manila Bay, he added, are susceptible to liquefaction and sea-level rise.

Land reclamation, he said, will only aggravate flooding in Manila, Pasay and Parañaque, and other low-lying areas near the bay, hence, underscoring the need to educate the people about such life-threatening issues.

Organized by the People’s Network for the Integrity of Coastal Habitats and Ecosystems (People’s NICHE), Bulacan Enumenical Forum, Akap Ka Manila Bay and Center for

Environmental Concerns, Philippines, the forum aims to highlight the threats of the project to people and the environment.

Project lacking ECC

In an e-mailed message to the BusinessMirror on July 22, Gloria Estenzo Ramos, Oceana vice president, said SMC legal issues hound the Bulacan Aerotropolis project.

Ramos, an environmental lawyer, said SMC still has no Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) for the airport construction, which, she said, was duly certified to by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) as of September 19, 2019.

She explained that an ECC for the same area was issued to Silvertides Holdings but only for the construction of access road and administration building, and not for a huge project like an international airport.

Environmentally critical project

The construction of an airport with mixed development, including reclamation, which impacts fisheries, wild birds, livelihoods and mangroves, are considered environmentally critical project and in an environmentally critical area at that.

“This requires full adherence to the requirements of the Environmental Impact Assessment System Act, the Fisheries Code, as amended, among other laws, which means full disclosure of the project, programmatic impact assessment of the project as an airport and public participation,” she explained.

Ramos said it is not even clear if Silvertides was able to secure an ECC for their extraction of the reported 205 million cubic meters of filling materials to be used for the project.

Worse, Ramos said the Environmental Management Bureau (EMB)-Region III of the DENR refused to issue a copy of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) to affected

residents and to Oceana, which is an important document for the stakeholders to understand the full environmental impacts of the project.

“The stakeholders, including nongovernment organizations [NGOs] and peoples organizations have the right to participate in decision-making in addition to the people’s rights to a balanced and healthful ecology protected by the State,” Ramos said.

Crucial requirement

Environment Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon said in an interview on July 11 that an EIA is crucial in every environmentally critical project.

Internally, Calderon, concurrent director of Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) of the DENR, said a harmonization initiative by the BMB with the EMB made some headway.

EMB is DENR’s main unit that issues ECCs other than the the department’s regional offices.

“Right now, as much as possible, we see to it that the BMB is part of the [EIA] review process,” he told the BusinessMirror.

In the EIA review process, he said the biodiversity lens will not be overlooked.

“It covers mitigation measures that are needed for ECCs issued by responsible offices,” Calderon said.

While saying that he is not privy to the Bulacan Aerotropolis Project EIA Review Process, or ECC issuance, he said an EIA report should integrate biodiversity consideration.

He said experts from the BMB should take part in the project scoping in order to determine the classification of the land where the project will be constructed, or the conservation status of the species that will be affected.

Important bird area

Cristina Cinco, a bird enthusiast, meanwhile, expressed her concern over the plight of critically endangered bird species whose natural habitats are shrinking because of destruction.

“Manila Bay was [classified] an Internationally Important Waterbird Site” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Wetlands International, she said.

Cinco, who is doing a study on birds and wetlands that was commissioned by Wetlands International, is the current vice president of Wild Birds Club of the Philippines.

She said the Philippines has 709 species of bird, 241 of which are endemic, or can only be found in the Philippines, making the country the third in the world in bird endemism.

Equally important is the Philippines’ being part of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF), one of nine major flyways across the globe. As such, it is a signatory to international treaties for the protection of migratory species and their habitats.

The EAAF stretches from Russian Far East and Alaska, southwards through East Asia and Southeast Asia, to Australia and New Zealand. It encompasses 22 countries, including the Philippines.

Declared as an Important Bird and Biodiversity area by BirdLife International, the northern Manila Bay, which covers the area from Navotas City in Metro Manila, to Bulacan and Pampanga provinces, has been identified as a waterbird congregation area.

Rare sightings

On January 11, a rare sighting of 24 individuals of black-faced spoonbills was recorded in Sitio Dapdap, Barangay Taliptip, Bulakan, Bulacan, the exact area where the airport will be constructed.

The birds came from breeding grounds in China and North Korea, flying all the way to the Philippines during the migration season.

Previous recorded sightings of the species in the Philippines were in Palawan; Olango Island, Cebu province; Bicol Estuary; and in Batanes province.

Another previous sighting in 2019 in Manila Bay area was in Sasmuan, Pampanga province. But prior to 2019, it was last sighted in Obando, Bulacan, 100 years ago.

This species is closely monitored by the International Black-faced Spoonbill Working Group of the EAAF Partnership and the Taiwan-based Black-faced Spoonbill Association

The species's population dropped to 200 and only about 22 individuals in 1980. However, its population as of 2016 is 3,356.

But Cinco noted that it still remains in the IUCN Red List of endangered species.

Environmental disruption

Sought for reaction, Leon Dulce, national coordinator of Kalikasan-People's Network for the Environment (Kalikasan-PNE), a convener of People's NICHE told the BusinessMirror that the presence of the bird populations are bioindicators of good ecological health.

“This is of crucial importance in these times when there are multiple epidemiological risks from pandemics, socioeconomic loss, and climate emergency all emerging from the disrupted environment,” Dulce said via Messenger on July 6.

“Massive land-reclamation activities in Manila Bay threatens the last remaining wetlands where migratory birds roost. The Bulacan Aerotropolis is one of the biggest threats that will destroy 2,500 hectares of mangroves and fisheries. It is outrageous that transportation mega infrastructure is being touted for economic recovery when global transportation is expected to remain disrupted until 2021,” he added.

“It is too pyrrhic a price to pay when the cost is the loss of our coastal greenbelts that serve as bird and other biodiversity sanctuaries, fisheries havens, and defense lines against disasters,” Dulce said.

With the government’s backing the project, should we say goodbye birds, and hello to big metal birds?

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