

FEMA Funds to Uphold the Legacy of Marketplaces

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Guaynabo, Puerto Rico – Four marketplaces located in Las Piedras, San Juan and Vega Baja will have their facilities repaired with nearly \$2 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The allocations seek to foster and promote these plazas, which are of great significance to the municipalities and their communities.

In general, the plazas will undergo repairs to lighting, security and roof membranes, in addition to replacing doors, air conditioners, signs and windows.

“The personal service and the variety of products and services, in addition to the sense of tradition and familiarity of the people, are part of what makes Puerto Rico's marketplaces unique. For FEMA it is important to be part of their revitalization, as they promote the economy of the municipalities through small merchants and are meeting points for locals and tourists,” said FEMA’s Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator in Puerto Rico José G. Baquero.

One of the projects in this allocation is the Vega Baja Héctor A. Joy Sandín Marketplace, with over \$876,400 to repair three of its facilities: the Market Plaza, an annex and the Public Car Terminal. Hazard mitigation measures such as the replacement of roof panels with water-resistant ones are considered with an allocation of over \$39,000.

The repairs will help root vegetable vendors like Osvaldo Camacho Alicea receive their customers in a safer and more comfortable area.

Camacho Alicea spent part of his childhood working in the former Marketplace with his father, Marcelo Camacho Martínez, who had a root vegetable stand. “In 1967 my dad brought me to work with him and I stayed until 1975. I had no vacations or holidays; I had to be with him working. I didn't like the work, but he said to me, 'If you don't study, I'm going to give you a college that you won't have to pay for.' I graduated from high school, went to Chicago and in 1983 I returned



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to Puerto Rico, to this day,” he recalled.

For him, marketplaces are important and, although he confessed that the number of customers has decreased over the years, he thinks that this tradition should continue. In fact, he still keeps in his stall the bus horn which he used to sell root vegetables around the neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, the executive assistant in charge of the Office of Protocol, Calendar and Communications for the municipality of Vega Baja, Luis R. Pérez Santos, pointed out that people still visit the marketplace, because it has everything they could need. “The people’s hospitality and the type of business here, which no longer exist in the urban centers, such as greengrocers, lottery salespeople, the hair salon, the flower shop; all that and obviously a cafeteria that is legendary. You will find the best stuffed potatoes there”, he indicated.

In the municipality of San Juan, two plazas received a total of over \$718,500 for repairs. These are the Río Piedras Rafael Hernández Marketplace, built in 1956, which has been awarded \$672,000; and the Santurce Marketplace, built in 1912, with over \$46,000.

According to the executive officer in charge of the Santurce Marketplace, Miguel Ángel Orta Vélez, the marketplace tradition is still alive. In his opinion, the plaza has evolved and has become a place recognized worldwide for its artistic and cultural events, and receives nearly 400,000 visitors each year.

“The Plaza has survived despite the proliferation of other spaces that sell food. The tradition of people coming to the square to eat prepared foods and search for their root vegetables, fruits and vegetables, it remains here,” he said. He also emphasized that for the merchants this is their way of life. “Some of them have been here for 30 or 40 years and many of them are the children of those who were originally here in the plaza,” he added.

One of these second-generation merchants is Jorge Luis Otero. For nearly 60 years, his father was in charge of the stall that he now manages. For Otero, it’s not only about the importance of cultural heritage, but also about offering good prices and a pleasant experience to the visitor, “so that they are satisfied and come back.”



Perhaps a good example of this is Arsenio Quiles from Lares, who has lived in Santurce since 1967 and has found his place in this plaza. Don Arsenio is 95 years old and spends his days here, happy and surrounded by “good people and good neighbors.” “This is my paradise. I am here every day. There is joy, events, you meet people and the community is very nice. You can find everything here,” he said. Quiles also said that he serves people when they arrive, sweeps if he has to sweep and even takes pictures with tourists from all over the world who want to take a souvenir of their visit to the iconic square.

On the other hand, an allocation of nearly \$264,000 went to the Juan Velázquez Marketplace in Las Piedras to repair its building, built in 1996. The plaza has the 52nd flag by artist Héctor Collazo Hernández and receives about 400 people a month. The Culture and Tourism director of Las Piedras, Elvin Agosto Rodríguez, said that although sales have decreased in certain areas, “the plaza remains alive due to the wide range of artisan workshops offered and the variety of events that take place.”

Businesswoman Mayrabel Tolentino Serrano, owner of a beauty salon, agrees that activity has decreased, but understands that the repairs in the plaza will benefit merchants and customers, since it will be possible to fix existing problems that affect the structure and, therefore, services.

For his part, the executive director of the Central Office for Recovery, Reconstruction and Resiliency (COR3), Manuel A. Rivera Laboy, said that “marketplaces represent an important opportunity for the development of local farmers and merchants. The reconstruction work and the implementation of mitigation measures will make these buildings, some of them historic, more resilient to future natural disasters. At COR3, we will continue to assist in the necessary steps to ensure that these works, which are subsidized by FEMA funds, are carried out in an expeditious and compliant manner.”

To date, FEMA has obligated over \$32 billion for more than 10,900 recovery projects in Puerto Rico following Hurricane María.

For more information about Puerto Rico’s recovery, visit fema.gov/disaster/4339, fema.gov/disaster/4473 and recovery.pr. Follow us on our social media at Facebook.com/FEMAPuertoRico, Facebook.com/COR3pr and Twitter @COR3pr.



Héctor A. Joy Sandín Marketplace, Vega Baja PR



Vega Baja, Puerto Rico (February 29, 2024) – FEMA obligated over \$876,400 to the Municipality of Vega Baja to repair three facilities of the Héctor A. Joy Sandín Marketplace: the Market Plaza, an annex and the Public Car Terminal. Hazard mitigation measures such as the replacement of roof panels with water-resistant ones are considered with an allocation of over \$39,000. Photo FEMA/Karixia Ortiz

Santurce Marketplace, San Juan, PR





San Juan, Puerto Rico (March 4, 2024) – FEMA allocated over \$46,000 to repair the Santurce Marketplace, built in 1912. Photo FEMA/Eliezer Hernández



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