

News News News

Matola stands firm against Chalillo Dam Project

Mr. Godsman Ellis presented an interesting article about the Chalillo Dam in last week's reporter. I would like to address his good writing with the following points. He referred to my standpoint against the Dam as being an ecological one. However, a strong message which I have been trying to convey is that sound management of the natural resources of Belize is directly and firmly tied into healthy economy.

The implementation of this proposed hydro scheme would weaken the greatest center of biodiversity in our country, creating the possibility for negative impacts to follow on a national level. We need to examine this aspect carefully, and also realize that our nature based tourism industry is indeed a nascent yet growing one, providing us with a healthier economy. It is not a situation where just foreigners see the benefits of the industry. Having been part of training tour guides at the Tropical Education Center in natural history, I have been

continually impressed at the wealth of knowledge held by them, and their desire to learn more, and the pride they feel sharing natural history information about their country with others. Our tourism industry is not one which we should turn our backs on, not an industry we should weaken by poor management of our natural resources. With a continued international profile as a country strongly preserving what is left of our biodiversity, Belize can only be placing itself in a firmer economic position as we enter the next Millennium.

The global tourism industry is enormous and is expected to surpass 4.2 trillion dollars by the year 2000. The fastest growing segment of the tourism industry is nature and culture based tourism, and this is what Belize is about. Taking away the base habitat which infuses our natural resources on many levels is simply not sound management of this industry, one which appears to have increasing potential for greater financial gain for

Belize. Mr. Ellis is so right in that more people should be brought into the Chalillo Dam picture. This project, if implemented, will affect many people on a national level. And the people should have a voice in this matter.

The Belize Alliance of Conservation NGOs (BACONGO) stated among its recommendations concerning the Chalillo Dam that "since the proposed dam would have a tremendous impact at a national level, the GOB should put this issue to a national referendum as prescribed by the Referendum Act of 1999." Mr. Ellis also has made a good point in stating the need for strong social assessments in association with the upcoming EIA.

A natural resources economist should be brought into the picture, addressing issues such as the monetary value the scarlet macaws, breeding in this area, have on the Belize economy, and how that monetary value is expected to grow in the upcoming years. And Mr. Ellis is correct about the financial arena surrounding this project.

In short, hydropower is a very lucrative industry and it is repeatedly documented that the real cost of dams to taxpayers and to governments are vastly undercalculated. It is no secret that companies in developed countries see large profits from dams built in developing countries. Have any of us been convinced that, if the Chalillo Dam goes forward, electricity rates would decrease?

Finally, there has been a growing interest, throughout Belize, about this proposed project. Our population is increasingly aware and concerned about the proposed dam, reflecting a desire to have a voice in this matter. The proposed Chalillo Dam needs to be kept in the public eye, and the public's voice should be part of the decision-making process.

In the final analyses, this is much more than a dam project, it is a project that gambles with altering the very base of what makes Belize so unique in the world. Let's continue to question the issue, there is much at stake.

Signed: Sharon Matola.

Sports Director alarms workers

Workers at the National Sports Council are alarmed at recent developments announced at a meeting of the council with the workers. Over 20 workers were present at the meeting along with the Sports Director, Evan Garnett and the Permanent Secretary, Dorian Barrow.

While several matters were discussed, of greater importance to the workers were the Christmas benefits and loan agreements relevant to them. According to minutes of the meeting the director spoke about the fact that the meeting was to be called before Christmas. "He made reference to that

called "salary advances", which must be issued only for personal emergencies.

- the Director is to decide what personal emergencies are

- salary advances cannot be more than four weeks of salary

- each worker is only allowed two personal advances per year

- six months is allotted to pay back the advance - and a 5% interest to be charged on the salary advances. This interest is to be used to buy ham and turkey for the staff at the end of the year.

Workers are upset, because the Director and Permanent Secretary are unilaterally seeking to

the discretion of the Head of Department and not to exceed six week's wages and not four weeks as the new director is hoping to dictate. However, Section 5 also stipulates the reasons for which these will be provided:

- a) to buy articles for use at work;

- b) to meet expenditure for replacement of property lost or irreparably damaged due to fire, hurricane, flood, earthquake, or other act of God;

- c) to meet medical expenses for himself or a member of his immediate family but only on presentation of the necessary medical

there is even provision for 'an exceptional advance of wages, which vary from 8 to 16 weeks of wages of a person, depending on their years of service. The rules are specific about the repayment periods ranging from 32 to 64 weeks. The repayments are to be deducted from the worker's wages and each installment "should normally be not less than one quarter nor more than one third of the worker's wages for any wage period."

One worker explained that this new administration is seeking to circumvent the rights, which the union and workers have already fought for over the years.