

Senior legislator rules out giving gov't power to regulate fuel prices

By Marielle C. Lucenio

SENATOR Sherwin T. Gatchalian, who chairs his chamber's energy committee, said on Tuesday that giving the government the power to control fuel prices is "dangerous," and instead proposed the permanent implementation of fuel subsidies for jeepney drivers. "Time and time again, (we have seen) that the government is the worst operator. When you put businesses in the hands of the government, corruption will

ensue," Mr. Gatchalian told *BusinessWorld* by phone call.

Retail fuel prices rose for an eighth consecutive week on Tuesday.

Groups representing consumer and rural interests have urged legislators to give back to the government the power to control fuel prices, which would require the repeal of the Downstream Oil Industry De-regulation Act of 1998. The law gave oil companies the power to set their own market prices to increase competition in the fuel market.

Mr. Gatchalian said measures such as the suspension of the excise tax on fuel, which was resorted to by Thailand, will hurt the economy by cutting off a source of government revenue.

"The country earned around P131 billion in excise taxes in 2020, and it is projected to increase over time," he said.

Instead, he said, the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) must make the fuel subsidy program for jeepney drivers permanent. The program is known as Pantawid Pasada.

"I would rather institutionalize the program down to the tricycle drivers as it is supposed to be a shock absorber against increasing oil prices," he said.

BusinessWorld asked the LTFRB to comment, but it had not replied at the deadline.

On Tuesday, petroleum product prices increased for an eighth consecutive week, with the price raised P0.80 per liter for gasoline; P0.65 for diesel; and P0.45 for kerosene.

Since the start of the year, fuel prices have increased by P8.75 per liter for gasoline; P10.85 for diesel; and P9.55 for kerosene.



A TAXI seen afloat at a flooded area of Araneta Ave. near E. Rodriguez, Quezon City on July 25, 2021.

PHILIPPINE STAR/MICHAEL VARGAS

DPWH evaluating sites for NCR catch basins to counter floods

THE Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) regional office in Metro Manila said it is currently evaluating sites for catch basins to minimize flooding in the capital.

The site initially proposed was the open space at the University of Santo Tomas campus, but this was rejected due to fears that construction would affect the university's older buildings.

"We started scouting possible government areas... *doon sa mga* low-lying areas *na* noted *na sa pagbabaha* (in low-lying areas where flooding happens)," DPWH Regional Director Nomer Abel P. Canlas told *BusinessWorld* in a recent phone interview.

"We are now in the process of surveying and coordinating with some LGUs (local government units) and other government agencies," he added.

He said the project, known as a water impounding facility, will be proposed to the DPWH national office.

In the DPWH's flood management master plan for the Greater Metro Manila area, among the considered measures was the application of rainwater catchment system that will enable some communities to store rainwater for reuse instead of allowing it to run off into a waterway.

The World Bank estimates that the Philippines was visited by 94

destructive typhoons between 2011 and 2015, or 9.3% more than the number of typhoons between 2006 and 2010.

The World Bank provided technical and financial assistance for the department's flood management master plan for Greater Metro Manila.

"The Philippines is expected to be among the countries that will suffer long-term and repetitive damage from extreme weather patterns brought about by climate change. Lack of inclusive growth negatively affects the ability of a large part of the population to deal with natural disasters," the World Bank said in a project information document posted on its website.

The World Bank also noted that many areas in Metro Manila are low-lying and designated as flood prone, with insufficient protection against frequent inundation as natural drainage is often restricted during rainfall events by high river and sea water levels.

"About 80% (1,700 mm) of the annual rainfall occurs during the typhoon season from June through October, when rain can be particularly intensive. As a result, flooding is a recurrent problem in Metro Manila that causes flooding of roads, affecting traffic and movement of people, and flooding in houses and buildings." — **Arjay L. Balinbin**

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BIR reminds political candidates to declare unused contributions

THE Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) said political candidates to report their unused contributions as income, to maintain up-to-date tax registrations, and to issue receipts for political contributions.

The BIR issued the reminders in Circular No. 22-2022, which applies to all candidates, political parties, party-list groups, and campaign contributors.

In most cases, campaign contributions are not classified as taxable income because they are typically not used for personal spending, the BIR said. However, campaign funds that were either unused or used before the campaign period are subject to income tax and must be declared on income tax returns.

"Thus, to be considered as exempt from the income tax, these campaign contributions must have been utilized to cover a candidate's expenditures for his/her electoral campaign during the campaign period," the BIR said.

The circular, released on Monday, requires all candidates and political organizations to

issue non-VAT (value-added tax) official receipts for every contribution received, whether in cash or in kind, at fair market value.

Similarly, only donations used during the campaign period are exempt from donor's tax.

The campaign period officially began on Feb. 8. The elections will be held on May 9.

Goods and services purchased with campaign funds are subject to 5% creditable withholding tax. These include payments for media services, printing, entertainment, and property rental.

The use of land and equipment free of charge for the campaign should be declared as expenses, based on prevailing rates.

The Omnibus Election Code requires all political candidates and groups are required to keep a record of contributions and expenses. After the election, they must submit a statement of these contributions and spending to the Commission on Elections. — **Jenina P. Ibañez**



Alibaba unveils 'virtual influencer' for the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022

AI-powered Dong Dong makes her debut to engage with Olympic fans during livestreaming

Alibaba Group, a Worldwide TOP Partner of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has unveiled its brand-new virtual influencer for the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 ("Games"). Based on cloud technology, *Dong Dong*, the advanced digital persona created by Alibaba to engage with fans, brings the possibilities of cloud-based innovation closer to consumers.

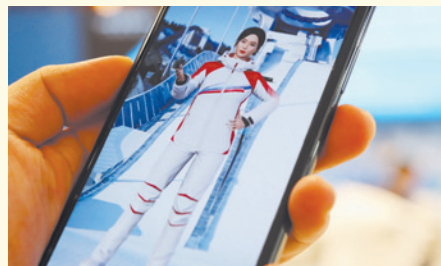
Developed by Alibaba DAMO Academy, Alibaba Group's global research initiative, Dong Dong was created to be a passionate, outspoken Beijing-born 22-year-old woman who loves winter sports. To better connect with Olympic fans, especially the younger, tech-savvy generation, Dong Dong is known for her authentic human-like features, sparkling personality, as well as her speciality to interact with audiences in an engaging manner.

Among her many talents, Dong Dong is not only going to promote Olympic merchandise which can be bought in the official Olympic shop in China on Tmall during her dedicated livestreaming shows, but she can also respond to questions in a lively, natural human voice with different emotions, along with various body gestures from giving a thumbs-up to posting heart-shape gesture and wiping away tears of disappointment. In addition, she can perform live talk shows to introduce Olympic fun facts to the audience, and show-off her enthusiastic, upbeat dance moves to accompany the Olympic theme songs to cheer for the Olympians. All these engaging interactions are powered by cloud-based digital technologies.

"Our ambition is to use cloud technology to give the Olympic Winter Games a digital uplift and to deliver Olympic Winter Games experiences relating to cloud and e-commerce platform services to fans in a creative way. That's why we developed Dong Dong, with the hope that the cloud-based virtual influencer can create better engagement with the younger, digital natives in an exciting and natural way," said Xiaolong Li, leader of Alibaba Virtual Human & Intelligent Customer Service.

To realize Dong Dong's dynamic personality, human-like glamour and natural voice, Alibaba built a special cloud-based AI model, which uses Text to Speech to synthesize human voices and leverages 3D-driven technology to create various realistic facial expressions and natural body movements. Powered by cloud computing and AI technologies, Dong Dong can look, speak and act like a young woman with lively personality. Meanwhile, Alibaba's multimodal algorithms, which leverage Natural Language Processing (NLP), Emotional Speech Synthesis and computer vision on the cloud, have been used to make Dong Dong "smart" enough to take part in human-like dialogues naturally, with her scripts entirely generated by cloud technologies.

"In the future, we will push technology boundaries even further to create an enthralling mixed reality. Digital personas or virtual influencers will find new ways to engage with their audience through immersive experiences or a metaverse-style setting, whether during large-scale, global



Dong Dong, Alibaba's cloud-based virtual influencer for promoting its Olympic Winter Games partnership

sports events like the Olympic Games, virtual conferences or 3D exhibition tours. In addition, they can also be very helpful with their practical capability as diligent, smart and efficient assistants to the reporters," Mr. Li added.

Other creative technologies designed to support engagement with Olympic fans have also been unveiled during Beijing 2022:

Cloud Showcasing

Developed by the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 (BOCOG) and supported by Alibaba's digital technologies, Beijing 2022 Cloud Showcasing, a virtual exhibition is debuted to introduce the Olympic Partners and for the Olympic fans to win souvenirs through gamifications and lucky draws. Leveraging Alibaba DAMO Academy's knowledge on the cloud, Alibaba also unveiled its own Cloud Showcasing, a virtual 3D exhibition that highlights Alibaba's journey as a worldwide Olympic partner, through its cloud technologies underpinning the digital transformation of the Olympic Games, and the innovative e-commerce platforms featuring official Olympic merchandise.

Cloud Official Olympic Store on Tmall

Starting from the 100-day countdown to the Olympic Winter Games, Alibaba's e-commerce platform Tmall has displayed Beijing 2022 merchandise through Alibaba's cloud-shelf technology in more than 7,000 stores across China. From the kiosks in the stores, consumers can create their own Olympic-themed merchandise such as T-shirts and bags tailored to their preferences, and get their personalized items delivered to their home within a couple of days.

"Through our series of digital technologies, we want to bring to sports fans a unique experience — as interactive, engaging and personalized as possible — so they can join in the excitement for Beijing 2022," said Chris Tung, chief marketing officer at Alibaba Group. "As we continue to innovate and create new formats of engagement, we hope to apply these technologies to other global sports games or events in the future, so consumers across the globe can benefit from these cloud-based innovations."

BoI pitching potential Taiwan locators

THE Board of Investments (BoI) is inviting more Taiwan investors to enter the Philippine market, noting that some export locators have expanded recently.

Ceferino S. Rodolfo, BoI managing head and Trade undersecretary, said the door is fully open to Taiwan companies, with the Philippine economy picking up momentum in the wake of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

"We are ready to make it happen for you here in the Philippines. (The) door is fully open. In the Philippines, even during the pandemic, we strive hard to make sure that export manufacturing remains in operation. Some have even expanded," Mr. Rodolfo said during a recent

webinar conducted by the Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in the Philippines.

He added that the business climate is set to improve following the passage of amendments to the Retail Trade Liberalization Act and the amendments to the Public Service Act and Foreign Investment Act, which are awaiting the signature of President Rodrigo R. Duterte.

Mr. Rodolfo encouraged Taiwan companies to jointly develop and process minerals needed to fill gaps in the value chain for electric vehicles.

"We invite Taiwan companies so that we can process nickel, cobalt, and copper," Mr. Rodolfo said.

TECO representative in the Philippines Michael Peiyung Hsu called New Clark City in Tarlac a promising venue for Taiwan investors.

According to the BCDA, 15 Taiwan companies have located in New Clark City, generating 4,933 jobs and accounting for investment worth \$213.54 million.

BCDA Executive Vice-President Aileen Anunciacion R. Zosa said some of the investment opportunities in New Clark City include the Information and Communication Technology Corridor Project, the Data Center Colocation Facility, the Solid Waste Management, the Waste-to-Energy Project, and Research and Knowledge-based Pharmaceutical and Medical Facilities. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

Planning for food terminal network underway

THE GOVERNMENT and private partners are preparing a network of food terminals to receive and process produce and sell direct to consumers and market vendor associations, the Agriculture department said.

On Monday, Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar signed a memorandum of understanding to plan food

markets and terminals with KMV Asia Development Corp. and Banyara Development Corp.

The two companies will provide technical assistance in the design, policy framework and regulatory aspects of the food terminal network.

Potential sites will be evaluated via market and feasibility studies.

The project seeks to establish receiving and processing facilities for farm and fisheries produce.

A storage component will also help maintain the freshness and quality of the food, reduce postharvest losses, and yield more income for farmers and fisherfolk by adding value to their produce. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**

Senate candidates call for more agri funding

SENATE candidates Francis Joseph G. Escudero, currently the governor of Sorsogon, and Alan Peter S. Cayetano, the former Speaker of the House, said the agriculture sector requires a bigger budget commitment to build infrastructure like cold storage facilities.

At a forum organized by the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc., Mr. Escudero said cold storage will support farmers in far-flung areas by ensuring their produce does not spoil if it cannot be brought to market immediately.

"We lack cold storage facilities. We can't assure the good quality of our produce without cold storage in each province. Why don't we put up incentives for (those investing) in cold storage?" Mr. Escudero said.

On the Rice Tariffication Law, he said he plans to file amendments if elected. The law is coming up for review after three years of implementation.

"It has not achieved what it intended to do — supposedly to benefit the rice sector and rice farmers and bring rice prices down for consumers," Mr. Escudero said.

"Our imports should be timed properly timing. Why do we import (rice) during harvest? The imports compete with what our own farmers produce. We import *galunggong* (round scad). If only we supported fishermen with fingerlings, the benefits should have gone to our own fishermen," he added.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cayetano called for Presidential candidates "to commit to complete

a certain number of hectares of irrigation capacity during their term. Commitment should also be (made) on a concrete number of farm to market roads to be constructed during a Presidential term," he said.

Mr. Cayetano said agriculture should be promoted among the young as "desirable and profitable."

"Consider that many rich people (are) engaged in agriculture, (in contrast to) the popular image of poor Filipino farmers," he said.

"You can see (poor) farmers shown on television. But if they watch European or American movies where farmers are rich and use drones and high-tech devices, our young people will be convinced to take up farming," he added. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocsos**