Application process for ECCs classified as 20-day transaction

THE DEPARTMENT of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said the online application process for an Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) has been simplified with a goal of generating approvals or rejections after 20 working days.

The 20-day deadline is in line with the recommended processing time for "highly technical transactions" under the Ease of Doing Business Law (Republic Act 11032).

The 20-day category also includes projects that pose a risk to public health, safety, or morals, or activities that run counter to public policy.

In a memorandum circular, the DENR said the new online procedure applies to projects for which proponents must submit documents listed in the Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) checklist.

"Since 2015, no updating of procedures and requirements of the established ECC online system has been made," the DENR said.

The ECC is a key document that must be obtained before undertaking major projects. It includes an assessment of the project's impact on its surroundings, and is mandatory for mines, power plants and infrastructure projects.

The minimum documentary requirements for ECC applications filed online were listed as proof of authority over the project site, certification from the local government unit (LGU) on the compatibility of the proposed project, the project description, and geotagged photographs of the site, among others.

The new ECC application fee costs P5,070 while the amendment application costs P2,030.

The law requires simple transactions to be concluded within three days and complex transactions within seven days. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

Manila Water sees no service interruptions after augmenting supply

By Alyssa Nicole O. Tan

MANILA Water Co., Inc. said it is not currently implementing any water service interruption schemes, after a Senator said the dry season should not be used as a pretext to discontinue services.

"Water supply for the East Zone remains normal and we are not implementing any off-peak or rotational water interruptions," Manila Water Corporate Strategic Affairs Group Head Nestor Jeric T. Sevilla, Jr. said in a Viber message to *BusinessWorld*.

He said Manila Water can tap additional sources to cater to increased demand during the dry months. These include the Cardona Water Treatment Plant, which can produce up to 100 million liters of water per day (MLD), deep wells with output of about 115 MLD, and the Marikina Portable Water Treatment Plant which can add 20 MLD.

"We continue to maximize our distribution reservoirs, reduce our water losses to 13%, as well as install line boosters to ensure water reaches the elevated and farthest points of our service area," Mr. Sevilla said.

Senator Mary Grace S. Poe-Llamanzares, who chairs the chamber's Committee on Public Services, said the water concessionaires in the capital region should not use the dry season as a pretext for imposing water service interruptions.

Maynilad Water Services, Inc. Corporate Communications Head Jennifer C. Rufo had said the water interruptions that were supposed to end in April may extend to May due to the increased demand.

"We expect our water concessionaires to deliver on their commitments under their renewed franchise and revised concession agreement, and complete the projects necessary to have safe and reliable water on the taps," Ms. Poe said.

"It would be a disservice to fail our people in their most basic need at this time of struggle to recover from the pandemic," she added. "Complacency certainly has no place in these back-to-back threats."

Ms. Rufo told *BusinessWorld* in a Viber message that water interruptions at night give the company the opportunity to fill up its reservoirs in preparation for daytime peak demand.

"Hence, we can sustain water service during hours of the day when it is needed most, minimizing inconvenience to customers," she said, noting that the service interruptions will likely run from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. when most customers are asleep and not using water.

The need to manage supply in the network comes from the increasing demand for water due to hotter days, Ms. Rufo said.

"If it appears, based on our projections, that the demand is still likely to deplete our reservoirs without this intervention, then we extend the implementation of these daily off-peak interruptions for another 15 days," she added, advising customers to consistently store clean water during the dry season.

Ms. Rufo confirmed that Maynilad also has several supply augmentation measures, including the activation of deep wells and operation of modular treatment plants, which allow them to keep the service interruptions within off-peak hours.

Metro Pacific Investments Corp., which has a majority stake in Maynilad, is one of three Philippine units of Hong Kong-based First Pacific Co. Ltd., the others being Philex Mining Corp. and PLDT, Inc.

Hastings Holdings, Inc., a unit of PLDT Beneficial Trust Fund subsidiary MediaQuest Holdings, Inc., has an interest in *BusinessWorld* through the Philippine Star Group, which it controls.

Data breach reporting system up and running

THE NATIONAL Privacy Commission (NPC) said it has launched a reporting system for data breaches that facilitates notifications in instances where data has been compromised.

In a statement, the NPC said the system, called the Data Breach Notification Management System (DBNMS), was launched on April 20. The system aids personal information controllers (PICs) in submitting annual security incident reports and personal data breach notifications as required by NPC Circular No. 16-03.

"The DBNMS addresses the limitations of manual submission and processing, as well as increases public transparency by allowing PICs to access pertinent and real-time information on their data breach notification," the NPC said.

Privacy Commissioner John Henry D. Naga said that the data privacy efforts go "hand-in-hand with embracing emerging technologies that will revolutionize data privacy and protection. Hence, the NPC continuously adopts and implements digitization of our processes to efficiently achieve our objectives."

Following the launch of the DBNMS, the NPC said it will no longer accept Breach Notification and Annual Security Incident Reports via e-mail, personal filing, ordinary mail, licensed courier service, and other mode of physical submission.

The commission added that a PIC, including those with multiple branches or offices, can only have one account in the online system.

"If the PIC has other related companies or entities, each company or entity must register in the system under separate accounts. The company or entity is responsible for maintaining and submitting its reporting requirements to the NPC," it said. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

Energy efficiency policies to enable big users to practice conservation

MOST of the policies required to implement the Energy Efficiency and Conservation (EEC) Act (Republic Act No. 11285) have been implemented, and companies need to respond by stepping up their efforts to conserve energy in their organizations, Senator Sherwin T. Gatchalian said Friday.

Speaking at the Energy Efficiency Day 2022 webinar organized the Philippine Energy Efficiency Alliance (PE2), Mr. Gatchalian, chairman of the Senate committee on energy, said 35 out of the 40 provisions of the EEC Act are in force as of March 15.

Prior to the passage of the law, the Philippines was the only country in ASEAN without a law encouraging the efficient utilization of energy or providing tax incentives for energy-efficient projects.

He said that at present 34 companies have registered as Energy Service Companies to pursue efficient projects.

"I urge more companies to start undertaking energy efficiency and conservation measures to realize energy savings early on while we recover from the ill effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," Mr. Gatchalian, who is seeking re-election, said.

Between April and June 2021, only 13.13% of the overall 30,333 designated establishments (DEs) were able to comply with the requirement to submit an annual utilization report.

Mr. Gatchalian said the Inter-Agency Energy Efficiency and Conservation Committee's (IAEECC) recently-issued advisory requiring all government agencies to reduce their power and fuel consumption by at least 10% was a step in the right direction.

"Improving energy efficiency is an essential element of the transition to net zero. While the energy sector grapples with clearer policies, it's good to know that some multi-national corporations and conglomerates in the country have started wrapping up their initiatives to achieve net zero by 2050," he said..

In a separate statement, Mr. Gatchalian also highlighted the need for consumer education on maximizing energy efficiency by using the right appliances and devices with proper energy efficiency labeling.

Energy Undersecretary Felix William B. Fuentebella, meanwhile, said that by the Department of Energy's own reckoning, it has issued 25 out of 31 policies required by the EEC Act.

"Energy efficiency will have to be complemented with the right investment and financing vehicles," he added.

The DoE recently verified the Department of Budget and Management's energy management practices, noting its adoption of a 50-kilowatt peak (kWp) solar power system and other measures.

"The active implementation of the Government Energy Management Program or GEMP through the adoption of EEC best practices should be among the top priorities of our government agencies and entities," said Energy Secretary Alfonso G. Cusi.

PE2 President Alexander D. Ablaza said that with more specific guidelines supporting the EEC Act, the Philippines holds the potential to conserve up to 182 million tons of oil equivalent via energy-saving practices.

"The Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act is the one of the most significant policy tools to shift a market from a voluntary to a mandatory market regime, to send an assuring market signal to investors, lenders and end-users, and to enable innovative procurement, financing and business models," he added. — **Ram Christian S. Agustin**

OPINION

Managing the hybrid workforce

SUITS THE C-SUITE
CZARINA R. MIRANDA

First of two parts

For many organizations trying to regain their footing post-pandemic, it can be quite a paradigm shift to make decisions on adopting hybrid work models, especially since health alert levels continue to be lowered as a means of stimulating economic activity. Hence, under the new normal, corporate leaders will have to address new challenges and questions in managing hybrid teams.

There can be great reluctance on the part of organizations to come to terms with the need for a flexible workforce post-pandemic. While opinions vary on the actual productivity that remote work has delivered in the past two years vis a vis pre-pandemic operations, flexible work arrangements offered an avenue for many organizations to remain operational despite the lockdown. There is also anecdotal evidence in support of how various organizations remained productive with telecommuting. However, each organization will need to gauge productivity for themselves given the scale and nature of their operations.

A look into worker sentiment points to a general preference for an arrangement that involves flexibility in when and where employees perform their duties. The recent EY Future Consumer Index shows employees "losing interest in pre-pandemic work patterns," a finding that reinforces those made in the EY 2021 Work Reimagined Employee Survey that showed the majority of surveyed employees in Southeast Asia preferred not to return to pre-COVID ways of working.

In the case of the business process outsourcing industry, which employs an estimated 1.4 million workers, there has been overwhelming preference on the part of the talent for a balanced, hybrid work arrangement. This has prompted industry leaders to propose that the government reconsider its order for the outsourcing companies to prepare for a return to full office operations lest they lose their tax perks that are contingent on full on-site operations.

Over the past two years, hybrid teams have attracted an abundance of attention. Employees generally favor the opportunity to distance themselves from the workplace — both geographically and emotionally. Filipinos working in the National Capital Region and key cities notorious for traffic congestion found great relief from the hassles of the daily commute. In the human resources domain, the conversations these days among experts often gravitate to the paths that organizations plan to take post-pandemic.

The idea of hybrid work models being in the forefront of conversations in human resources did not happen by chance though, even with the lockdowns providing the impetus for organizations to stay agile and quickly find ways to keep operations going amid the restrictions on mobility especially in the first few months of the community quarantine. If you look at legislation related to hybrid work models, telecommuting was a concept already found in our legislative bills before health authorities detected the first COVID-19 case in the Philippines.

REMOTE WORK POLICY

Republic Act 11165 or the Telecommuting Act was signed in Dec. 2018 or more than a year before the pandemic. The law formalizes the option for employees to work from home and declares telecommuting as an alternative work arrangement that both employers and employees may implement upon mutual consent. The law also sets out the rights and duties of both employers and employees and promotes employee welfare.

Telecommuting and other alternative work models have since become an important subject for legislation and policymaking.

A look into our evolving policy regime on flexible work models brings to mind the Department of Labor and Employment's Labor Advisory No. 09 Series of 2020 which seeks to assist and guide employers and employees in the implementation of "various flexible work arrangements as alternative coping mechanism and remedial measures" during the pandemic. This may not, however, bolster the narrative for hybrid teams because its use of the term "flexible work arrangements" can actually worry employees; "arrangements" referred to in the policy are reduced work hours or workdays, rotation of workers, and forced leave — so-called "better alternatives than outright termination of the services of the employees or the total closure of the establishments."

Responsibilities of employers to their employees are likely to evolve as well if hybrid work models were indeed to become the norm.

The experience with telecommuting during the pandemic has, in fact, called the attention of lawmakers to the issue of rest hours as employers' control over employees now extends beyond work hours through the use of phone, email, and messaging apps. With technology and the ease of communication that it brings, it is easy for lines to blur between work and home. Employees can easily fall into the trap of voluntarily keeping lines of communication open and their devices switched on beyond work hours even if not required by their superiors.

Senate Bill 2475 or the Workers Rest Law proposes penalties on employers who intrude on workers' rest hours to prevent work from depriving employees of their personal time.

COMPRESSED WORKWEEK

The government's economic managers have also considered a proposal for a four-day workweek to help businesses cut costs. There are still no clear signs on whether this proposal will lead to a new law or a department order since the government is likely to present this as management prerogative rather than a mandate for companies to follow.

Two years of telecommuting has also given rise to a host of concerns on the part of employees who are responsible for staying available for tasks and meetings during work hours. While remote work saves them the costs and hassles of the daily commute, in return they carry the burden of logistics, internet and utility expenses. Senate Bill 1706 seeks to ease this burden by providing a tax break equivalent to a P25 reduction from the taxable income for every hour worked from home.

There have been companies that have opted to extend financial assistance to specific teams within the organization, whose continued productivity weigh more than the cost of any internet connectivity subsidy.

OFFICE SPACE

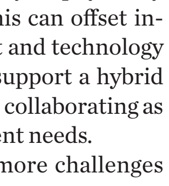
Other practical considerations that many companies choosing the hybrid team path will have to tackle include the use of leased office space. Some have had to contend with being unable to negotiate significant discounts on office lease contracts despite the extended lockdowns in the Philippines that kept most workstations unoccupied. A decision to pursue a hybrid work model post-pandemic will mean reconsidering an organization's pre-pandemic need for space.

As organizations explore options to adjust their use of space and optimizing every square meter, some have looked into the hoteling concept (telecommuters reserve a workstation or desk for their in-office days) or hot desking (an employee finds and works at any open seat when in the office). Hoteling is seen as a way of cutting an organization's office space requirements and costs while also ensuring that social distancing can be managed should employees physically enter the workplace. This can offset investments in equipment and technology that may be needed to support a hybrid team and keep members collaborating as well as responsive to client needs.

There can be many more challenges to learn along the way as most organizations take this route, and leaders' responses can vary from one company to another. As organizations devise their own mix of work arrangements that are suitable to their business models, this direction cannot be seen as a partial return to the old "normal." Instead, this charts a new path forward that acknowledges the changes in workforce needs and the opportunity for leadership to reimagine the future of work.

In the second part of this article, we will talk about the challenges of keeping employee well-being at the forefront in the hybrid work environment.

This article is for general information only and is not a substitute for professional advice where the facts and circumstances warrant. The views and opinion expressed above are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of SGV & Co.



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