

Philippine Stock Exchange index (PSEi)

6,951.54

▲ 118.01 PTS.

▲ 1.72%

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BusinessWorld

PSEI MEMBER STOCKS

AC Ayala Corp. P739.00 +P7.00 +0.96%	ACEN ACEN Corp. P7.10 +P0.15 +2.16%	AEV Aboltiz Equity Ventures, Inc. P59.70 +P0.20 +0.34%	AGI Alliance Global Group, Inc. P12.10 +P0.14 +1.17%	ALI Ayala Land, Inc. P31.00 ---	AP Aboltiz Power Corp. P38.00 +P1.90 +5.26%	BDO BDO Unibank, Inc. P119.00 +P5.00 +4.39%	BPI Bank of the Philippine Islands P110.00 +P6.90 +6.69%	CNVRG Converge ICT Solutions, Inc. P19.20 +P0.70 +3.78%	EMI Emperador, Inc. P20.30 +P0.15 +0.74%
GLO Globe Telecom, Inc. P2,098.00 +P38.00 +1.84%	GTCAP GT Capital Holdings, Inc. P464.00 +P2.00 +0.43%	ICT International Container Terminal Services, Inc. P208.00 +P5.00 +2.46%	JFC Jollibee Foods Corp. P245.00 +P3.00 +1.24%	JGS JG Summit Holdings, Inc. P56.50 -P0.20 -0.35%	LTG LT Group, Inc. P9.80 ---	MBT Metropolitan Bank & Trust Co. P59.00 +P1.65 +2.88%	MEG Megaworld Corp. P2.18 +P0.03 +1.40%	MER Manila Electric Co. P300.00 ---	MONDE Monde Nissin Corp. P13.82 +P0.44 +3.29%
MPI Metro Pacific Investments Corp. P3.95 +P0.16 +4.22%	PGOLD Puregold Price Club, Inc. P35.25 +P0.15 +0.43%	RLC Robinsons Land Corp. P15.00 -P0.02 -0.13%	SCC Semirara Mining and Power Corp. P34.85 -P0.05 -0.14%	SM SM Investments Corp. P908.00 +P4.00 +0.44%	SMC San Miguel Corp. P94.00 -P1.50 -1.57%	SMPH SM Prime Holdings, Inc. P37.95 +P0.05 +0.13%	TEL PLDT, Inc. P1,412.00 +P7.00 +0.50%	URC Universal Robina Corp. P149.80 +P9.50 +6.77%	WLCON Wilcon Depot, Inc. P32.10 +P0.10 +0.31%

Resurging travel bookings bring labor shortage

THE hospitality industry is facing a challenge in acquiring talent amid the recovery of the travel industry as the reopening of the borders increased the need for manpower.

"With the reopening of borders at the start of 2022, Southeast Asia's travel industry has seen rapid recovery and the increasing need for manpower," Hilton Hotels Corp. Area Vice-President and Regional Head for Southeast Asia Alexandra Murray told *BusinessWorld*.

According to Ms. Murray, the wider hospitality industry, which was severely affected by the pandemic, finds it hard to rebuild its workforce.

"The current labor shortage has also led to fierce competition for hospitality talent in the region, including the Philippines where the tourism industry is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels by 2024," Ms. Murray added.

To address this, Hilton invested in employer brand-building and recruitment strategies as

it saw the real and urgent need to recruit talent across all of its markets.

"One of our key priorities, in addition to retaining our best talent, is to also attract new talent who has never worked in a hospitality role and acquaint them with the industry by providing best-in-class onboarding and upskilling programs," Ms. Murray said.

"This strategy is key in addressing the talent crunch and ensuring we continue to deliver the unparalleled hospitality and

unique experiences that Hilton is renowned for," she added.

Ms. Murray said that one factor that makes hospitality careers "less attractive" is its challenging environment.

She added that there is a need to "rebuild jobseekers' confidence in hospitality as an industry of choice and to shift mindsets that a hospitality career is more than just a job."

Partnerships with government agencies are also seen to help in promoting the sector and provide more opportunities.

"With tourism and hospitality a strong driver for the region's local economies, revitalizing the industry is also a key priority for many governments across the region, including the Philippines," Ms. Murray said.

"Hospitality companies can partner with government agencies to promote the sector as an industry of choice with plenty of opportunities for hospitality talent to meet growing demands," she added.

According to Ms. Murray, the job fairs and skills training by dif-

ferent government agencies help in growing the workforce amid the sector's recovery.

Hilton saw Southeast Asia as its second-largest market in the Asia-Pacific region and it said that it remains confident in the tremendous long-term growth opportunities across the market.

"Southeast Asia is leading tourism recovery in Asia-Pacific and we are optimistic that the region will continue to stay at the forefront in 2023," said Ms. Murray. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Domestic travelers drive Bohol hotel's recovery

OCCUPANCY rates at South Palms Resort Panglao returned to pre-pandemic levels last year due to the influx of domestic travelers, a company official said.

"I believe the opportunity for domestic travelers has been amazing for the Philippines," Hope Marie R. Uy, managing director of South Palms Resort, told *BusinessWorld* in a recent interview.

"Domestic tourism in the Philippines is a massive market and that has supported us very well and moving forward we are confident that they will always be there."

South Palms Resort achieved a 95% average occupancy rate per month last year, according to Ms. Uy, who will also manage the group's new project, Panglao Shores.

South Palms Resort and Panglao Shores are under the Alturas group of companies, which also

has interests in mall operations, supermarkets, cinemas, food chains and farms.

The group's resort operator, Panglao Bay Premiere Parks and Resorts Corp., on Thursday launched Panglao Shores, a new estate that is a flagship project under the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA).

Karen Mae G. Sarinas-Baydo, assistant chief operating officer of TIEZA-Tourism Enterprise Zones Management Sector, said the government agency partnered with the company as it aims to meet the demand for accommodations in Bohol.

"There is a room gap currently. I think we know that a lot of people are now traveling, revenge travel as we know it," Ms. Sarinas-Baydo said in a recent press launch.

"We want them to be here in Bohol because of the accessibility

of the airport — just a direct flight from Manila and five minutes from the airport you'll be at Panglao beach," she added.

Aside from resort hotels, the estate will also have 37,000 square meters of commercial space and over 1,000 residential units.

Although currently operating at pre-pandemic levels, Ms. Uy said that the company's plans of including commercial spaces in the first phase of the project were deferred due to the pandemic.

"We were supposed to have a commercial property as well for phase one but the pandemic gave us a setback for commercial retail spaces," Ms. Uy said.

Despite the change of plans, Ms. Uy said that they will not be selling the commercial lots to private investors as the company plans to lease the spaces.

"We are a group of companies that have retail spaces in malls, so we are already experts in that field. We will be commercially leasing spaces, we will build the buildings and then we will lease them," Ms. Uy added.

Meanwhile, the company is eyeing to close deals with developers for the estate's residential segment.

"We like to partner with developers for the residential segment of the estate," Ms. Uy said.

At present, the company is eyeing to have half of the lot for vertical developments with the other half for residential.

"A few of them are vertical, a few of them are horizontal. It will really depend on the market. I think for the next month or so we will have a clearer picture of how it's gonna be," Ms. Uy added. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Proposed MSME e-commerce platform faces delays

THE planned creation of an e-commerce platform for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) has faced delays, Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said.

"The estimate is that we need at least a quarter to reformulate the approach," Mr. Pascual told reporters in a recent chance interview. "But it is still an active project. I keep on saying that we need to do it because it helps the transition of local MSMEs before going to the global arena."

The platform, which is in partnership with the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), was supposed to be launched before the end of 2022, he said.

"We need to incorporate and integrate the new elements that are coming up, which

caused the delay. The [e-commerce] players are also evolving. The original partner that we talked to, they might have to go to a different way of approaching it," Mr. Pascual said.

Aside from being a stepping-stone for MSMEs, the e-commerce platform is also seen to help increase consumer awareness about the various products offered by local MSMEs.

"I'm also looking at it (e-commerce platform) as a system by which we can make known nationally what's really available in the Philippines. This is because the moment we put into the global platform directly the Philippine MSMEs, their products will be eclipsed, drowned by many more products that are coming from different countries in the world," Mr. Pascual said.

"The platform we will set up will serve as a way by which Filipinos can really see and focus on what's available from Philippine enterprises across different regions," he added.

Meanwhile, Mr. Pascual said that another goal for the Department of Trade and Industry's e-commerce platform is to serve as a basis for an e-catalog for the government.

"But that will come later... It might require a law to mandate government offices to buy, mandatorily, not just giving a margin of preference," Mr. Pascual said.

"If a product is available domestically from local producers, it is mandatory to get it there. We don't want a situation where Filipino companies are subjected to competition in an uneven playing field," he added. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochoa**

Silang gov't helps hasten completion of CALAX Silang-Aguinaldo

MPCALA Holdings, Inc., a unit of Metro Pacific Tollways Corp. (MPTC), on Sunday said the municipality of Silang in Cavite is helping the company in fast-tracking the right-of-way acquisition for the Silang (Aguinaldo) Interchange of the Cavite-Laguna Expressway (CALAX) project.

The completion of the Silang (Aguinaldo) Interchange of the P35.7-billion CALAX is expected by the first quarter of the year, MPCALA said in a statement to *BusinessWorld* on Sunday.

"That is the hope, to open sometime March or April depending on the Department of Public Works and Highways' (DPWH) propensity" to get the land, the company said.

It noted that Silang Mayor Kevin A. Anarna is trying to prepare his town "for both tourism and investments." The Silang municipality is "helping us," the company added.

The DPWH earlier said that a private company was demanding P50 million to P60 million — higher than the P16 million valuation of the agency — in compensation for the parcel of land that is critical to the completion of the CALAX Silang (Aguinaldo) Interchange.

"We are very willing to help MPCALA and the national government to fast-track the opening of the CALAX Silang (Aguinaldo) Interchange," Mr. Anarna said in a statement.

The road section, which is now 64% finished, was scheduled for completion in the third quarter of 2022.

The fifth of the eight segments of the 45-kilometer CALAX spans 3.9 kilometers, with 2x2 lanes from Silang East Interchange to Aguinaldo Highway.

According to the DPWH, the entire project is expected to provide efficient transport facilities for the ecozones in Cavite and Laguna.

It is also seen to reduce traffic congestion, particularly on Governor's Drive, Aguinaldo Highway and Sta. Rosa-Tagaytay Road, and boost the competitiveness of Region IV-A or CALABARZON (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal,

and Quezon) as an investment destination.

Once fully operational, the project is expected to cut travel time between the Manila-Cavite Expressway and the South Luzon Expressway to 45 minutes from the current 2.5 hours.

MPTC is the tollways unit of Metro Pacific Investments Corp., which is one of three key 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 a majority stake in *BusinessWorld* through the Philippine Star Group, which it controls. — **Arjay L. Balinbin**

OUTLIER

Metro Pacific rises amid talk of foreign investor's entry

METRO Pacific Investments Corp. (MPIC) was among the most active stocks last week as investors reacted to speculations about the company agreeing to sell a substantial stake to a foreign investor.

Data from the Philippine Stock Exchange (PSE) showed a total of 224.07 million MPIC shares worth P869.69 million were traded from Jan. 9 to 13, making it the 14th most actively traded stock last week.

Shares in the Manuel V. Pangilinan-led company closed higher by 12.5% week on week to P3.95 apiece on Friday from its P3.51 finish on Jan. 6. The stock has gone up 15.5% since the start of the year.

"Price action of MPI [last] week was largely driven by speculation that a foreign investor will acquire a significant stake (up to 20%) in MPI, as well as the possibility of MPI delisting its shares," said Rastine Mackie D. Mercado, China Bank Securities Corp. research director, in an e-mail, referring to the firm's stock symbol.

"Given these developments, MPI disclosed a clarification [last] week saying that: (1) various options to enhance company and shareholder value are being discussed, and; (2) a possible delisting of its shares is among options considered," said Mr. Mercado.

"MPI also said that no final decision has been made," he added.

Last week, MPIC shares rose by as high as 5% in early trade to reach their highest in nearly 14 months. The rally happened after speculation of a foreign investor's potential entry and a supposed plan to become a private firm.

On Thursday, MPIC issued a clarification to the stock exchange that it "receives a lot of interest from investors. We consider all offers for the benefit of the company and its shareholders."

However, it said that it had "not entered into any definitive agreement for an acquisition by any party of a substantial interest" and neither is it "aware of any definitive agreement entered into by its principal shareholders."

On Friday, it also clarified speculations about plans to go private.

"MPIC discusses several options available to it for the benefit of the company and its stakeholders, and among the options considered is the delisting of MPIC's shares. While delisting as an option is being discussed, no final decision has been made," it said.

Diversified Securities, Inc. Equity Trader Aniceto K. Pangan said in a text message that MPIC became ac-

tive mainly due to the possible entry of Japanese investors Mitsui & Co.

"The stock price appreciated from a closing price of P3.51 per share last Jan. 6 to an intra-high of P4.08 per share or more than 16% in value," added Mr. Pangan.

China Bank Securities' Mr. Mercado said the potential acquisition of a substantial stake in MPIC by an outside investor "may suggest that the stock is undervalued at prevailing market prices."

"However, we think any potential deal might still be at its early stages as [MPIC] noted that no definitive agreements have been finalized thus far," he said, adding that the firm's 12.5% week-on-week rally indicates that "the market perceived recent developments as positive for the company and its shareholders."

MPIC's top line rose by 16.9% to P37.61 billion during the nine months to September last year. Likewise, its attributable net income increased by 4.2% to P16.4 billion.

Mr. Pangan said the revenue forecast should be around P60 billion, or up by double digits, "with the increase in economic activity due to ease in restrictions together with the lowering of fuel prices."

For next week, Mr. Pangan expects MPIC to be on consolidation, with major support at P3.79 and resistance at P4.00 per share until the entry of the foreign investor materializes.

Mr. Mercado pegged major support and resistance levels at P3.65 and P4.18 per share, respectively.

"General market sentiment has turned upbeat given prospects of the US Federal Reserve scaling down its pace of rate hikes (market-implied rate hike of 25 basis points at next policy meeting) as inflationary pressures continue to show signs of easing," added Mr. Mercado.

"We expect this to bode well for MPI's stock price as well moving forward. However, volatility is likely to remain elevated as investors await further developments on the company."

MPIC, which has interests in power, water, hospitals, and toll roads, is one of three Philippine units of Hong Kong-based First Pacific Co. Ltd., the others being PLDT Inc. and Philex Mining Corp.

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