

Feasibility studies to be bid out for Samar-Leyte, Panay rail projects

THE Department of Transportation (DoTr) said it will soon offer feasibility-study contracts for the proposed Samar-Leyte and Panay railway projects.

"The study is under procurement. A typical high-quality feasibility study will take two years," Leonel Cray P. de Velez, assistant secretary for planning and project development, said in a Viber message on Thursday.

The DoTr website indicates plans to bid out the feasibility studies for the projects this quarter.

The studies, each valued at P78.60 million, will include the pre-feasibility and development studies as well as the preliminary detailed engineering design of the infrastructure projects, the DoTr said.

Last year, the DoTr said it obtained about P600 million

in funding for four feasibility studies on four railway projects — the Panay railway, the Philippine National Railway North Long Haul line, the North Mindanao Railway, and the San Mateo Railway.

The Panay rail system project includes the construction of a passenger and freight railway, logistics facilities, maintenance

depots, and transit-oriented developments.

Also in 2023, the DoTr created a task force for the proposed Eastern Visayas Metro Railway System which will link Samar and Leyte islands.

Last month, the DoTr was undertaking a study to evaluate the viability of the Mindanao Railway Project Phase 3. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

Raimondo assured PHL will address red tape, corruption

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. promised a US delegation that the government will cut red tape and corruption to make investing in the Philippines more attractive, US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo said on Thursday.

"President Marcos was clear with us and has been in his actions, that he is very forward-leaning towards the US," she told a virtual briefing, after her two-day visit in Manila with a 22-member US Presidential Trade and Investment Mission this week.

"All these things (cutting red tape, anti-corruption measures) are steps in the right direction which will make the Philippines an even more attractive place to do business for American companies."

The US mission indicated plans to invest over a billion dollars in the Philippines, Ms. Raimondo said on Monday.

Visa and United Parcel Service, Inc. committed to upskill Filipino workers from micro, small and medium enterprises and support

their digitalization efforts, the US Department of Commerce said on Wednesday.

Microsoft Corp. also expressed its commitment to work with the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, and the Departments of Budget and Management and Trade and Industry (DTI) to train jobseekers and students in artificial intelligence.

Google will also roll out a career certificate program in 50 virtual campuses at the DTI 1,300 local business centers in 16 regions.

More than 30 million workers are expected to benefit from the digital upskilling investment pledges, Ms. Raimondo said at the briefing.

Private equity firm KKR & Co. has also pledged to continue investing about \$400 million to develop about 2,000 telecommunications towers in the Philippines.

Calixto V. Chikiamco, Foundation for Economic Freedom president, said in a Viber message that Mr. Marcos should appoint an official that will act

as a "ringleader or *bastonero*" to impose discipline on local governments and government agencies that impose unwarranted bureaucratic delays on investors.

"Government should institute express lanes for big-ticket investment projects, which further reduces the number of days in the processing of permits and licenses at all levels of government," Terry L. Ridon, a public investment analyst and convener of think tank InfraWatch PH said in a Facebook Messenger chat.

The President should also implement a whistleblower program to bring to the surface corruption in major projects.

US companies are keen on investing in the Philippines' semiconductor industry and to double the number of packaging, testing and assembly facilities, Ms. Raimondo told a business forum in Makati on Tuesday. The Philippines has 13 of these facilities in total.

The Philippines is one of seven countries that the US is

working with to diversify its semiconductor supply chain, as required by the CHIPS and Science Act.

Under the law, the US will provide \$52.7 billion in subsidies to boost chip manufacturing and to persuade chipmakers in China to move to the US or other friendly countries.

Last month after his visit to Manila, US State Department Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy, Environment Jose W. Fernandez said high energy costs are keeping semiconductor companies and miners from investing in the Philippines.

"These are some of America's biggest and most successful companies and they are deeply committed to making these investments," Ms. Raimondo said on Thursday.

"He (Mr. Marcos) is very committed to making the necessary changes in the regulatory structure, cutting tape, being against corruption, being a transparent government." — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**

Post-pandemic review questions practicality of specialist hospitals

HOSPITALS dedicated to treating infectious diseases are not cost-efficient, according to a doctor participating in a webinar organized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Hyuncheol Bryant Kim, an associate professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said establishing hospitals designed for use in pandemics may see low utilization rates.

"If it is dedicated only for the infectious diseases, it will basically be empty," he said at the ADB webinar, "What Has COVID-19 Taught Us About Asia's Health Emergency Preparedness and Response?"

In 2022, the House of Representatives approved on third and final reading a measure seeking to establish the Philippine Center for Disease Prevention and Control. A counterpart bill in the Senate is awaiting second reading.

"We do not have to focus too much on infectious diseases. But rather than we have to focus on our general muscles to fight against any type of enemies in the future," Mr. Kim said.

When the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic broke out, governments implemented lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus.

The Philippines, which had one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world, posted negative growth, with students enduring a learning crisis as schools shut down.

The Philippines had over 4 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, resulting in more than 66,000 deaths. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

Thai firm hoping to ride PHL growth with plant launch by Q4

THAI construction materials company Shera PCL Ltd. said it hopes to start operations in the Philippines by the fourth quarter to grab a share of the country's growing construction industry.

On the sidelines of the Philippine World Building and Construction Expo, Thunnop Jumpasri, Shera's country head for the Philippines, said such an investment will be the company's first outside Thailand.

"The construction industry of the Philippines I think registered the highest growth among ASEAN countries and we have seen a lot of potential of the products here in the Philippines," Mr. Jumpasri said.

"I think the outlook and the projection for Philippine gross domestic product this year is around 6-7% and normally the construction industry grows (at the same rate as) the economy," he said.

The company's first plant outside of Thailand will be located in Teco Industrial Park in Malabacat, Pampanga and is registered with the Board of Investments.

"We plan to finish the construction of the factory within this year. The total investment is around P2 billion for the whole factory," he added.

Initially, the factory is planned for output of 100,000 tons of fiber cement board, expandable later to 200,000 tons.

Once operational, the plant is expected to take on 120-150 employees, more than 90% of which will be local hires.

"We intend to recruit Filipinos for more than 90% of our workforce because we see that they have the capability and skill that are suited for our operations. And this will not only be for our facilities team; even our commercial team is composed of Filipinos," Mr. Jumpasri said.

Shera has been present in the Philippines for over 15 years. The Philippines is its biggest market outside Thailand, followed by Vietnam and Indonesia.

Last year, the company booked P1.5 billion in sales in the Philippines, with expectations of sales growth of 10-15% this year. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

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Subsidies may be needed to spur e-jEEPNEY adoption

ELECTRIC JEEPNEY adoption in the Philippines needs a push from government subsidies and incentives, according to a climate and energy policy group.

"Technology alone cannot drive change, and the systems approach to transitioning our public transport system cannot be overemphasized. We have to invest in the capacity of transport cooperatives, workers, and drivers, and strengthen partnerships among all stakeholders," Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities (ICSC) Director for Urban Development Maria Golda P. Hilario said in a statement on Thursday.

In a report by Sandy Mae Gaspay and Arse John Salison, "The Economics of e-JEEPNEY Transport Operations: Business Models, Enabling Factors, and Current Challenges," the ICSC said among the challenges to accelerating electric jeepney adoption are the lack of a public transport route plan and access to financing.

"Support from the government, in terms of capacity building, subsidies, and service contracting, will be vital in the early stages to establish a firm



A CONDUCTOR of a modern jeepney called for passengers along Elliptical Road in Quezon City, Sept. 17, 2022.

foundation for these modernized fleets," it said.

The government's Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP) aims to modernize traditional jeepneys with environmentally friendly vehicles that are costlier.

The program requires operators to consolidate individual franchises under cooperatives or corporations to facilitate the acquisition of new vehicles.

In 2023, the Electric Vehicle Association of the Philippines (EVAP) said it anticipates an electric vehicle fleet of seven million by 2030 as the Department of Energy pushes to accelerate EV adoptions.

Last year, EVAP estimated the EV fleet at 15,300 units, including 354 electric motorcycles and 88 electric buses.

Rene S. Santiago, former president of the Transportation Science Society

of the Philippines, said fully electrifying jeepneys is impossible without government subsidies.

"Electrifying jeepneys is a pipe dream... If the government wants to accelerate EVs, it needs to subsidize 80% of purchase price," Mr. Santiago said in a Viber message.

"At this point, it might be difficult to fully electrify jeepneys and other public transport vehicles, given the prohibitive capital outlay required to enter the commercial electric vehicle sector," according to Terry L. Ridon, a public investment analyst and convener of think tank InfraWatch PH.

The ICSC has recommended that to fully shift to EVs, the government must prioritize incentive schemes and rationalize routes.

To date, the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board is still in the process of completing the PUVMP route rationalization plan.

Route rationalization configures routes to better match passenger demand. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**



Lufthansa in talks with Maharlika to help finance facility in Clark

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said on Thursday that Lufthansa AG's maintenance unit Lufthansa Technik Philippines is hoping to tap the Maharlika Investment Corp. (MIC) to help fund its proposed P8-billion facility in Clark.

In a statement, the DTI said discussions on the project took place on the sidelines of President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.'s visit to Germany on March 12.

"Lufthansa is considering a partnership with MIC for this project, with initial discussions already underway with Maharlika Fund's President and Chief Executive Officer Rafael Consing, Jr.," the DTI said.

The facility is expected to employ at least 400 workers.

"The expansion plan of Lufthansa will provide high-quality and better-paying jobs to Filipinos while strengthening the aerospace maintenance, repair, and overhaul capabilities of the country," the DTI said.

Lufthansa Technik currently operates a 23-hectare maintenance center at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

The leased Clark site is estimated at about two hectares and has a two-year completion timeline.

According to the DTI, potential Lufthansa Technik maintenance customers at the new facility include British Airways, Korean Air, Lufthansa, Emirates, and Qantas.

The company also shared plans for a Phase 2 expansion and is considering Clark, Bulacan or Sangley Point.

Lufthansa AG is currently studying mounting direct flights to the Philippines, Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said, which will open opportunities for tourism but also for other business services of Lufthansa that the Philippines can support."

To date, Lufthansa employs 2,800 mechanics, engineers and support personnel and operates eight hangar bays and workshops in the Philippines. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Disposable vape ban being studied

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said it is studying a Department of Health proposal to ban disposable vapor products (vapes).

"I think the issue with disposable vapes is that the device includes the actual refill product in one system, meaning it is not divisible into the actual vape device and the consumable," DTI Consumer Protection Group Head Amanda F. Nograles said in a briefing.

She said because the devices do not break down into separate components, the consumable part of the disposable device cannot be tested.

"It's harmful because how will you test the possible effects of pods? How will you test if it is really safe for consumption?" Ms. Nograles said.

Under Republic Act No. 11900 or the Vaporized Nicotine and Non-Nicotine Products Regulation Act, the DTI, in consultation with the Food and Drug Ad-

ministration, sets the technical standards for safety and quality of vape products.

"Our rule is to subject the products to mandatory product certification and registration starting June. That is why we are preparing the testing facilities for the devices and the consumables (vape pods)," Ms. Nograles said.

In the absence of testing, the DTI currently accommodates "the manufacturer's submission of testing results from accredited labs."

Last month, the DTI said additional funding will be needed to upgrade capacity at DTI's vape certification facilities.

According to the DTI, its facilities are not currently capable of processing HTP consumables, e-liquids for vapor products, and nicotine pouches.

Asked how much more funding is needed Ms. Nograles said: "We requested... less than P170 million." — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**