PCCI 'wish list' for DepEd includes amending Enhanced Education Act

THE Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) urged the Department of Education (DepEd) to work on better aligning the curriculum with industry demand to raise the competitiveness of the workforce.

It also recommended amendments to Republic Act (RA) No. 10533, or the Enhanced Education Act, with the aim of harmonizing the higher education curriculum to be more attuned to workplace needs.

RA 10533 expanded the basic education program by two years to include at least one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary education, and six years of secondary education.

The group also recommended the enhancement of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics programs, strengthening partnerships between schools and businesses to foster on-the-job training, and to promote micro-credentialing.

PCCI Human Resource Development Foundation, Inc. President Alberto Fenix, Jr. said the organization is proposing more work immersion components and to include basic higher education subjects in senior high school (SHS).

"Part of our recommendation to the new Secretary (former Senator Juan Edgardo M. Angara) is to have more work immersion not only in the technical-vocational-livelihood track, but even in the academic track, especially those in business," Mr. Fenix told *BusinessWorld* by phone.

"A lot of the academic subjects in the first two years (of tertiary education) should be tackled in SHS, like Mathematics, Literature, and English," he added.

He noted the shortage of teachers in SHS qualified to offer such university-level classes.

"On the other end, we were hoping that the degree courses would now take three years rather than four or five," he added.

The PCCI also urged the government to invest in teacher training, digital learning platforms, and infrastructure, especially in underserved and rural areas.

"These measures are essential to creating a pipeline of talent that will meet the evolving needs of industries and drive long-term economic growth," it added. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

DBM sees no diversion from unfunded 2025 budget items

THE budget will govern where funding raised for unprogrammed appropriations will be used, with no wiggle room to steer the funds towards other purposes, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) said.

"We stick to the very nature of unprogrammed appropriations — (they are a) standby fund," Budget Secretary Amenah F. Pangandaman said on the sidelines of a hearing.

"The bulk of the unprogrammed appropriations is for foreign-assisted (projects) subject to approval of the NEDA (National Economic and Development Authority) Board."

Next year's P6.352-trillion national budget contains as-yet unfunded items of P158.67 billion, 78.31% lower than this year's P731 billion. The government has not yet sourced the funds for these items and can resort to loans, new taxes, or stronger-than-expected revenue collections.

The standby funds include P78.36 billion for the Strengthening Assistance for Government Infrastructure and Social Programs, P26.27 billion in budgetary support to government-owned and -controlled corporations, and P25.46 billion for support to foreign-assisted projects.

Next year's unprogrammed appropriations also include half of the total allocation for the Revised Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Program at P25 billion.

"I think there's no agreement yet about their other equipment and projects" of the AFP, Ms. Pangandaman said.

Also to be funded on an as-available basis are the Marawi Siege Victims Compensation Program (P2 billion), the Risk Management Program (P1 billion), Fiscal Support Arrears for the Comprehensive Automotive Resurgence Strategy Program (P364.1 million), and the service development fee refund for the right to develop the Nampeidai property in Tokyo (P210.58 million).

The unprogrammed appropriations have been reduced after the bulk of government projects were classified as backed by programmed funds, Ms. Pangandaman has said.

The status of monthly releases charged against unprogrammed appropriations will be posted on the DBM's website, according to the 2025 National Expenditure Plan.

Zy-za Nadine M. Suzara, public budget analyst at the Institute for Leadership, Empowerment, and Democracy, said legislators must ensure that unprogrammed appropriations for next year do not breach the budget ceiling.

"Congress is allowed to move things around in the proposed version of the budget for as long as they do not violate the constitutional prohibition on increasing the total budget ceiling. The increase in the unprogrammed appropriations for the past three fiscal years since the 2022 GAA (General Appropriations Act) was passed had the effect of increasing the total budget ceiling," she said via Viber.

In January, minority legislators questioned before the Supreme Court the constitutionality of the P450 billion in unprogrammed appropriations inserted by the bicameral conference committee shortly before the passage of this year's P5.768-trillion budget.

Meanwhile, Ms. Pangandaman said the P89.9 billion in requested fund transfers from the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth), will be used for social services and infrastructure, and not necessarily for health-related projects. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

Zero-tariff EV imports bill hurdles committee

A HOUSE of Representatives committee approved on Tuesday a bill proposing to exempt imported electric vehicles (EVs) from tariffs, in order to promote wider adoption.

The measure which passed the House ways and means committee would grant tariff-free treatment on EV and charging-station equipment imports until 2028.

Imported completely built units of EVs "shall be subject to a tariff rate of zero percent for a period of five years," according to the text of the unnumbered substitute bill.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. last year signed Executive Order (EO) No. 12, which temporarily removed tariffs on electric vehicles and their components for five years.

The tariff-free treatment was expanded in May by the National Economic and Development Authority Board, which conferred the tariff exemption to electric motorcycles, tricycles, and hybrid electric vehicles.

"(Electric vehicles) will have zero tariff until 2028, in line with EO No. 12. We are just making it perfect by making it into law," Albay Rep. Jose Ma. Clemente S. Salceda told *BusinessWorld*.

It also clarifies the definition of an EV, he added, noting the absence of a government specification. "(The measure) defines what an electric vehicle is… right now we don't know if an electric vehicle is two-wheeled, three-wheeled, or four-wheeled."

According to the bill, any vehicle with at least one electric motor is classified as an electric vehicle.

The Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) in February banned light electric vehicles, such as electric bikes and tricycles, from plying national roads in Metro Manila, citing safety concerns.

"What we're trying to say is that many electric vehicles are currently being charged as if they were ordinary cars, when they are not even allowed to use the same routes as regular cars," Mr. Salceda said.

"How can we promote electric vehicles if they are not allowed to use regular routes?" he added.

Electric vehicles are currently not allowed to traverse Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), South Luzon Expressway (SLEX), and Katipunan Avenue, among other major Metro Manila thoroughfares, according to MMDA. — **Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio**

Pangasinan solar project ruled eligible for green lane — BoI

THE Board of Investments (BoI) said it granted green-lane certification to Spotlight Power, Inc.'s (SPI) P1.9-billion solar power plant in Pangasinan.

In a statement on Tuesday, BoI said that it issued a green lane certificate to the 49.9-megawatt Mabini Solar Power Plant, which is expected to commence operations by the second quarter of 2026.

The project will occupy 41.25 hectares in Mabini, Pangasinan, and is projected to generate 150 jobs from pre-development until operations begin.

SPI, a renewable energy (RE) development company backed by Trina Solar Investment Pte. Ltd., said the green-lane route, which expedites the approval stages of power development, enhances "transparency and accountability" in all government agencies that issue permits and licenses for power projects.

"This government initiative truly delivers on the promise of easing the process of doing business, especially regarding highly complex requirements that are time-sensitive," it added.

Green lanes were created through Executive Order No. 18 and are intended to ease the path for projects deemed strategic from proposal stages to operational status.

The BoI tallies 102 projects involving investments of P3 trillion which have been certified to go the green-lane route, following the endorsement of its One-Stop Action Center for Strategic Investments.

The majority of the projects endorsed for green-lane treatment are RE projects.

The government took in increased RE investments after full foreign ownership in the industry was allowed. Foreign ownership was previously limited to 40%.

"As an RE developer, (the green lane) enhances our efficiency and increases our capability to deliver projects in a timely and effective manner," the company said.

"Because of this, our investors are more confident than ever that we can deliver more projects this year and in the years to come," it added. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

PHILIPPINE STAR/RYAN BALDEMOR

ASF checkpoint

A CHECKPOINT in Laurel, Batangas has gone up to control the spread of African Swine Fever (ASF) by hog traders transporting their animals. According to personnel at the checkpoint, trucks transporting hogs are banned from entering Laurel.

BIMP-EAGA deemed critical for kick-starting halal export trade

CROSS-BORDER investment within the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) will be key to the future success of the Philippine halal industry, the head of an industry association said.

At a conference on Tuesday, PCCI President Enunina V. Mangio said collaboration within BIMP-EAGA will help the Philippine halal industry prove its global competitiveness.

"We believe that halal is a key area where our cultural and economic commonalities offer unique opportunities for partnership and innovation," Ms. Mangio said.

"Investment flows across our borders will drive the development of infrastructure, enhance technological capabilities, and create new industries that can thrive within our integrated regional economy," she added.

She said other areas ripe for collaboration are agriculture, manufacturing, services, and tourism.

During a panel discussion, Brunei Darussalam Ambassador Megawati Manan said that her country has a skilled workforce and imports raw materials in volume.

"Brunei's niche is our highly educated human resources … We can always see that there are opportunities there in terms of exporting our talent within the BIMP-EAGA region," she said.

"In terms of halal, we are importing a lot of raw materials, especially (farm products), and we have our eyes on the Philippines right now," she added.

She said that Brunei could also help bring Philippine halal products to the Middle East.

"We are looking at a third-party manufacturer that will bring agricultural produce into Brunei to be manufactured … which will be packaged with the Brunei halal brand to help the products go up to the Middle East," she said.

Malaysian Ambassador Dato Abdul Malik Melvin Castelino said that the key focus for the BIMP-EAGA should be the regions' natural resources.

"The Philippines is one of the key players in the BIMP-EAGA region. It has a lot of resources, including copper, gold, nickel, and, of course, many agricultural products like bananas, pineapples, and coconut," he said.

"These resources complement the industrial and manufacturing needs of the region, with countries importing and exporting raw materials and semi-processed goods," he added.

He also added that other significant areas of cooperation include the cross-border trade in fisheries, textiles, automotive, electronics, and semiconductors.

Indonesian Ambassador Agus Widjojo said that since the BIMP-EAGA countries have much in common in terms of natural resources.

"That poses a challenge when we have to look for opportunities, but we also have differences, which is why we belong to different countries," he said. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Pineapple exports up 2.7% in 2023 on solid demand from China

PINEAPPLE exports rose 2.7% to 600,000 metric tons (MT) in 2023 due to strong demand, particularly from China, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

In its Major Tropical Fruits Review, the FAO said that a 3% increase in shipments to China boosted pineapple exports last year. China took up about 43% of all pineapple exports in 2023.

It cited strong demand for "premium quality pineapples."

The FAO said that the Philippines' MD2 variety has been well-received by the market due to its long shelf life, price-to-quality ratio, and year-round production cycle.

MD2 is the most commonly planted pineapple variety in the Philippines.

It added that the average export unit value of Philippine pineapple rose 3.8% to $593 per MT.

Other export markets, like Japan and South Korea, also expanded between 6-8% in 2023. Japan accounted for about 30% of Philippine pineapple exports, while South Korea took up 14%.

The Philippines remained the second-largest exporter of pineapple after Costa Rica.

Shipments from Costa Rice rose 5% to 2.1 million MT in 2023, following a 5% drop the year prior.

"Weather conditions in key Costa Rican growing areas were favorable for the cultivation of pineapple throughout 2023, resulting in higher yields and thus higher supplies for export," the FAO said.

The US and the European Union remained the exclusive destination for Costa Rican pineapple.

Global exports rose 3.9% to 3.2 million MT, driven by the increase in Costa Rican supply. Costa Rica accounted for 65% of the export trade in 2023. — **Adrian H. Halili**

Modernized fish hatcheries seen boosting aquaculture prospects

THE National Fisheries Research and Development Institute (NFRDI) said on Tuesday that modernized fish hatcheries will help raise the output and competitiveness of aquaculture.

"The modernization of hatcheries will elevate and transform the aquaculture industry into a more economically profitable, cost-efficient, and cost-effective operations," NFRDI Executive Director Lilian C. Garcia said during a memorandum of agreement signing for its temperature-controlled hatchery project.

The NFRDI's partners in the *bangus* (milkfish) hatchery project are the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) and the Department of Science and Technology's Metals Industry Research and Development Center.

She added that the project will jumpstart the mechanization and automation of hatcheries in the Philippines.

On the sidelines, Ms. Garcia said that the project's objective is to increase the supply of *bangus* fry for growers.

"The current problem is that the production of fry has been affected by the seasons… through this project there will be a stabilization (of supply)," she added. — **Adrian H. Halili**

CORRECTION

AN ITEM carried last week in the Economy page on a tax to be proposed to Congress misidentified the taxable item as carbon emissions. The correct item being considered for new tax legislation is the Motor Vehicle User's Charge. *BusinessWorld* regrets the error.