OPINION

Negros reunited: The Visayas' new frontier for renewables, warehousing, and BPO

REALITY CHECK
JET YU

Negros Island is rewriting its economic story. Once known as the country's sugar bowl, the newly reestablished Negros Island Region (NIR) is emerging as the Visayas' renewable energy capital, capturing nearly half of all approved investments in the second quarter (Q2) of 2024.

For decades, residents of Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental were compelled to travel to Iloilo or Cebu for regional government services due to the island's segregation between Western and Central Visayas. To address this, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. in 2024 officially reestablished the NIR and fulfilling a long-standing aspiration of Negrenses. Unlike previous executive attempts, RA 12000 provides a stronger legal and administrative framework, enabling full decentralization of government functions and streamlined inter-agency coordination across Negros Island and Siquijor. The unified regional administration is designed to accelerate investment, stimulate economic growth, and enhance regional competitiveness by harnessing the island's full potential.

Prior to the creation of the Negros Island Region, Negros Occidental residents were included in Western Visayas, while Negros Oriental and Siquijor residents were included in Central Visayas. In the 2024 census, the exclusion of these provinces resulted in a notable population decline in Central Visayas (-3.9%) and Western Visayas (-1.8%), impacting on the regional demographic profiles and planning considerations.

Beyond the political symbolism, the impact is already visible on the ground. From billion-peso solar farms and biomass facilities fueling the energy grid, to Bacolod's growing role as a logistics and outsourcing hub, Negros is positioning itself as one of the most dynamic growth centers in the Visayas. This is a clear shift that signals both opportunity and challenge for investors.

AGRICULTURE POWERS NIR'S TRANSITION INTO A DYNAMIC AGRO-INDUSTRIAL AND RENEWABLE ENERGY POWERHOUSE

NIR's strong agricultural base makes it a hub for agribusiness and value-added industries, fueling demand for logistics and infrastructure expansion. In 2024, the Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing (AFF) sector generated P83.39 billion, ranking second in the Visayas. Negros Occidental, known as the "Sugar bowl of the Philippines," also accounts for more than half of national sugar production, supported by 13 sugar mills and six refineries, including Victorias Milling the largest integrated mill and refinery in the country.

Sugar by-products, particularly bagasse and cane trash, have become critical inputs for renewable energy. Biomass facilities now form a cornerstone of the island's power mix, contributing to the fact that 99.1% of Negros Occidental's electricity production comes from renewable sources.

The clean energy transition has also reshaped the investment landscape. In Q2 2024, NIR secured P86.5 billion in approved foreign investments, equivalent to 45.6% of the national total, with the bulk directed toward renewable energy. Furthermore, other key projects include AboitizPower's 173-MWp Calatrava solar farm, Citicore's 100-MWp Silay facility, and the P6.9-billion Bacolod-Bago solar plant (150 MWp) slated for completion in 2025. In total, more than 1,000 MW of renewable capacity is in the Department of Energy (DoE) pipeline for Negros.

COST COMPETITIVENESS AND NEW INFRASTRUCTURE FUEL BACOLOD'S WAREHOUSING GROWTH

Building on this agricultural and green foundation, the NIR is also seeing steady growth in industrial and logistics activity, particularly in Bacolod City. Demand is driven by its proximity to ports, airports, and major urban centers. Most occupiers are engaged in logistics, distribution, and personal storage, with rising interest from FMCG firms targeting the local consumer market.

At the heart of this activity is the Bacolod Real Estate Development Corp. (BREDCO) port, which serves as the city's logistics backbone and is evolving into a warehousing hub, with facilities ranging from 1,700 to 5,000 sq.m. While flooding challenges persist within the port area, adjacent sites offer room for expansion that supports sustained growth.

The Negros Island Region accounted for 61% of total shipcalls in the Visayas, underscoring its pivotal role in regional maritime activity. Within the region, Panay/Guimaras recorded 91,337 shipcalls, significantly higher than Cebu's 39,576, and among the highest compared to major ports in Luzon and Mindanao. In terms of cargo movement, the region handled 37% of the Visayas' total volume, with Panay/Guimaras emerging as the top contributor in the NIR and the second highest across the Visayas.

The reestablishment of the Negros Island Region presents an opportunity to strengthen logistics and inter-island connectivity, particularly as Negros Occidental accounts for most of the country's sugarcane output. However, the region's dependence on sugar leaves it vulnerable to climate risks and price volatility. Thus, the diversification to other industries and services as mentioned above is crucial in sustaining the growth of NIR.

Key Metric Comparison to Attract BPOs (compiled by PRIME Philippines)			
	Cebu	Iloilo City	Bacolod City
Average Lease Rate	P670 per sq.m.	P610 per sq.m.	P600 per sq.m.
Average Wage	P453-501 (Region)	P480-513 (Region)	P480-513 (Region)
English Proficiency	High (EF EPI score: 581)	Moderate (EF EPI score: 543)	High (EF EPI score: 564)
Tax Exemption (Operating less than a year)	• Tax on Transfer of Real Property • Tax on Business of Printing and Publication • Franchise Tax • Amusement Tax	• Tax on Transfer of Real Property • Tax on Business of Printing and Publication • Franchise Tax • Amusement Tax	• Tax on Transfer of Real Property • Tax on Business of Printing and Publication • Franchise Tax • Amusement Tax
Commuting Infrastructure	• Cebu North Bus Terminal (CNBT) • Cebu South Bus Terminal (CSBT) • Port of Cebu • Cebu-Cordova Expressway (CCLEX) • Mactan-Cebu International Airport • Metro Cebu Expressway	• Iloilo International Airport • Sicogon Airport, Iloilo Fastcraft and Roro Terminal • Iloilo Central Line Bus and Jeepney Terminal • Tagbak Bus Terminal	• Bacolod-Silay Airport • Bacolod North Bound Terminal • Bacolod City South Terminal • Macumbal Bus Transport • BREDCO Port

Bacolod also enjoys a cost advantage. Warehouse rental rates range from P150-250 per sq.m. per month, at par with Iloilo and below Cebu's P185-300, giving the city a competitive edge for occupiers. Looking ahead, strategic infrastructure projects such as the Bacolod–Negros Occidental Economic Highway, the New Dumaguete Airport in Bacong, and the Panay–Guimaras–Negros Island Bridges are poised to enhance connectivity across key gateways. These include the established BREDCO and Dumaguete Ports as well as the Bacolod–Silay and Sibulan Airports, with the upcoming Bacong Airport expected to significantly boost trade and regional integration.

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES POSITION BACOLOD AS THE NEXT BPO FRONTIER

Bacolod City's office market is gaining traction, driven by the expansion of the BPO sector. Recognized as a "Center of Excellence" for IT-BPM and one of the country's "Next Wave Cities," the industry employs about 40% of the city's white-collar workforce, underscoring both its reliance on outsourcing and the sector's confidence in Bacolod as an alternative to Cebu and Metro Manila.

In the first half of 2025, Bacolod's office occupancy dipped below 80% due to new stock in the market. The flip-side of the market is that it gives ample room for new entrants and providing occupiers with greater leverage in negotiations. Rental rates average P500-800 per sq.m., comparable to Cebu but well below Metro Manila's P900-1,100, making Bacolod a cost-efficient option for firms seeking scalability without compromising talent access. This is supported by a steady pipeline of over 20,000 college graduates annually and lower operating costs than in Metro Manila.

Developers are reinforcing this momentum. Megaworld's Upper East Township delivered Bacolod's first LEED-certified office building and, in June 2025, became the city's first PEZA-accredited IT Park, with a second tower underway. Other major developers such as Ayala Land and Robinsons Land also have their respective mixed-use developments in the city.

While Bacolod is gaining ground, its office market will reach its potential only if key hurdles are cleared. Foremost is the difficulty local developers face in securing PEZA accreditation, which limits the supply of fiscally incentivized space that outsourcing firms prioritize when choosing sites. By contrast, Cebu hosts dozens of PEZA-accredited buildings, and Iloilo's accredited stock is clustered in Iloilo Business Park.

NIR ADVANCES ITS POSITION AS A KEY REGIONAL GROWTH CENTER

Anchored by agriculture, fueled by renewable energy, and supported by competitive industrial and office markets, the Negros Island Region is steadily transforming into a diversified investment hub. This convergence signals its evolution from a traditional agricultural economy into a dynamic center for industry, services, and sustainable growth, firmly positioning it as one of the most promising emerging markets in the Visayas.

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CLI acquires 79-ha Liloan site for largest Cebu township

CEBU LANDMASTERS, INC. (CLI) has acquired a 78.8-hectare (ha) property in Liloan, Cebu, through its joint-venture subsidiary Cebu Homegrown Developers, Inc. (CHDI) with Ixidor Holdings, Inc., to be developed into the province's largest integrated township.

"The Liloan acquisition marks a strategic move in CLI's growth roadmap, reinforcing its commitment to prudently expand its landbank while addressing the strong and sustained housing demand across its core markets particularly in VisMin," CLI said in a stock exchange disclosure on Monday.

The planned estate, located about 17.6 kilometers north of Metro Cebu, will include a multi-segment residential community, commercial centers, and green and open spaces.

It will also be connected to transport hubs to balance accessibility and convenience.

"This acquisition substantially deepens our Cebu footprint and advances our mission to create leading townships in the VisMin (Visayas-Mindanao) region, following the success of the Davao Global Township in Davao City and Manresa Town in Cagayan de Oro City," CLI Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Jose R. Soberano III said.

"Together with Ixidor Holdings, our trusted partner in CHDI, we are committed to creating a model Cebuano township that is built for the future, where a combination of economic, social and environmental benefits will be felt for many generations."

As of end-June, CLI's consolidated net income rose by 13% to P2.49 billion, driven by higher sales, revenues, and faster project completions.

In the coming months, the developer plans to launch 12 new projects worth P29 billion in Metro Cebu, Palawan, Davao, and South Mindanao. It is also preparing for its first project in Luzon by 2026.

CLI has about 127 residential, mixed-use, hotel and resort, and township projects across 18 key cities in the Visayas and Mindanao.

At the local bourse on Monday, CLI shares closed flat at P2.41 apiece. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

EEI secures CALAX section, Megaworld hotel contracts

LISTED construction firm EEI Corp. said it has secured contracts to build a section of the Cavite-Laguna Expressway (CALAX) and Megaworld Corp.'s Arcovia Hotel in Pasig City, expanding its project pipeline for the quarter.

In a stock exchange disclosure on Monday, EEI said MPCALA Holdings, Inc., a unit of Metro Pacific Tollways Corp., has selected the company for the construction of the P2.7-billion subsection 1 of CALAX in Kawit, Cavite.

"These new project wins mark a significant turnaround for EEI, reflecting our resilience, competitiveness in the industry, and renewed growth momentum," said EEI Senior Vice-President and Head of Commercial Operations Anna Payawal-Figuera.

The project covers the construction of the roadway, drainage systems, and related structures, EEI said, noting that once completed, the section is expected to improve connectivity between Cavite and Laguna by easing traffic congestion.

"More than expanding our portfolio, this infrastructure and building projects reaffirm our commitment to nation-building by helping drive economic growth, enabling connectivity, and delivering facilities that uplift the lives of our people and our communities," Ms. Payawal-Figuera said.

EEI has also secured the contract for the construction of Megaworld's Arcovia Hotel in Pasig City, which covers civil, structural, and architectural finishing, including painting and waterproofing works.

These newly secured contracts bring the company's project pipeline to P19.1 billion for the quarter, EEI said, adding that its total backlog, or unworked portion of existing contracts, reached P39.24 billion as of end-August.

In July, the company announced that it was preparing to build the first phase of the P15.75-billion Philippine International Exhibition Center (PIEC) in Pasay.

The PIEC, planned for construction in Pasay Harbor City along Manila Bay, will have a gross exhibition area of 269,000 square meters and is projected to be the largest exhibition and convention center in Southeast Asia.

At the stock exchange on Monday, shares in the company closed unchanged at P2.75 apiece. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

Powering Lives Beyond Energy: Shell's Programs Uplift Communities Nationwide

Social Investments Toward Resilient Communities

Shell Philippines has long recognized the importance of supporting not only its worksites and host communities but also the broader Filipino society. This commitment led to the establishment of Pilipinas Shell Foundation, Inc. (PSFI) on Aug. 19, 1982, as the company's dedicated social development arm. Today, Shell continues to advance this mission through initiatives that promote sustainable growth and community resilience. These efforts span across livelihood, education, nutrition and food security, health and safety, access to energy, environmental stewardship, and disaster preparedness.

"Shell powers the lives of more than 16 million Filipinos, primarily in areas where we operate," said Sergio C. Bernal, Jr., Vice-President for External and Government Relations of Shell companies in the Philippines.

The educational Shell NXplorers program has reached more than 3,000 participants in the country to date.

When disasters strike, Shell Pilipinas mobilizes resources under Project Shelter, delivering relief to affected communities through Shell ACTS volunteers.

Livelihood and Education at the Core

Shell remains committed to empowering individuals through skills development and education. The Sanayan sa Kakayahang Industriyal (SKIL) program provides out-of-school youth with technical and vocational training in partnership with TESDA and other institutions. Courses include welding, automotive mechanics, consumer electronics, pipefitting, small engine repair, scaffolding, industrial electricity, food and beverage servicing, and business process outsourcing. To date, over 6,000 individuals have completed the program.

In agriculture, the Integrated Farming Biosystem (IFBS) Training Program offers an innovative approach to sustainable farming. Conducted at the Shell Training Farm in Bombon, Camarines Sur, the program promotes a closed-loop system where waste from one component becomes input for another, maximizing resources and minimizing environmental impact. The immersive three-day training equips traditional farmers with practical knowledge to become agri-entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship is another key focus. Through Shell LiveWire, the company supports tech start-ups and community enterprises by providing access to funding, mentorship, and long-term market opportunities. The program fosters innovation in energy, environment, circular economy, and local prosperity. Since its launch, Shell LiveWire has supported over 180 startups, created more than 1,000 jobs, and integrated 16 enterprises into Shell's supply chain.

Shell Philippines also invests in education through Shell NXplorers, a global program that nurtures critical and creative thinking among youth through sustainability-driven projects. In the Philippines, it has reached over 3,000 participants.

Complementing this, Shell continues to offer scholarships that enable young Filipinos to pursue STEM education, fields vital to national development and community progress.

Powering Communities, Protecting Lives

To extend energy access to underserved areas, Shell launched Project SINAG (Save, Invest, Nurture Access to Green Energy and Technology), which has brought affordable power to over 4,500 residents across 14 communities. This initiative enables families to light their homes, start small businesses, and access essential services.

In parallel, Project Coconut trains coconut growers in entrepreneurship and biofuel production. By promoting coconut methyl ester as a sustainable biodiesel component and encouraging the use of byproducts, the program helps farmers boost their income while supporting renewable energy.

During disasters, Shell activates Project Shelter, mobilizing nationwide relief efforts. In 2024 alone, over 40,000 relief packs were distributed, and emergency hubs were established in more than 200 Shell Mobility sites.

Each year, around 1,000 Shell ACTS (A Community That Serves) volunteers participate in community activities, including delivery of food, water, and emergency supplies for disaster relief efforts. This volunteerism platform connects Shell staff and contractors to community programs, giving them opportunities to serve those in need and contribute to nation-building.

Shell Philippines also continues its longest-running health initiative, Movement Against Malaria, which has helped reduce malaria cases and deaths in the country by over 97%. Today, 81 of the country's 82 provinces are malaria-free, with more than 12 million Filipinos benefiting from testing, treatment, and awareness campaigns.

Through these impactful programs, Shell demonstrates that powering progress goes far beyond providing energy—it's about building resilient communities, empowering individuals, and creating sustainable change across the nation.