LRMC.PH

LRMC is a joint venture company of Metro Pacific Investments Corp.'s Metro Pacific Light Rail Corp. (MPLRC), Ayala Corp.'s AC Infrastructure Holdings Corp. (AC Infra), Sumitomo Corp., and the Philippine Investment Alliance for Infrastructure's Macquarie Investments Holdings (Philippines) PTE Ltd. (MIHPL).

LRMC bets on new stations, upgrades to lift ridership to 450,000 by year-end

THE Light Rail Manila Corp. (LRMC), operator of Light Rail Transit Line 1 (LRT-1), expects to surpass its pre-pandemic ridership by the end of the year, driven by new stations and ongoing improvements.

"Right now, we are at 440,000 (daily) on average, that is the equivalent to our pre-COVID numbers. By the end of the year, our target is to hit 450,000 daily ridership," LRMC President and Chief Executive Officer Enrico R. Benipayo told reporters on the sidelines of the company's 10th anniversary.

Mr. Benipayo said that since LRMC took over operations of LRT-1, the company has implemented critical improvements, including the opening of new stations and the deployment of new-generation train sets.

The opening of the LRT-1 Cavite extension in 2024 is one of the key drivers of ridership growth, he added.

In 2019, LRMC's ridership averaged around 450,000 daily passengers, dropping to 350,000-370,000 in 2023. By November 2024, just before the opening of the Cavite Extension Phase 1, daily ridership stood at 323,000.

The first phase of the Cavite Extension was projected to add roughly 80,000 daily passengers, potentially bringing ridership to about 403,000.

"Last year, we were able to open a big extension, and you will notice that the facilities are more inclusive, and more modernized. We are committing to improve the older stations of the LRT in the next few years," he said, noting that these future station improvements will further boost ridership growth.

Metro Pacific Investments Corp. (MPIC) holds a 35.8% stake in LRMC through its unit Metro Pacific Light Rail Corp., while Sumitomo Corp. owns 19.2% and Macquarie Investments Holdings (Philippines) Pte. Ltd. holds 10%. LRMC is a joint venture of MPIC, AC Infrastructure Holdings Corp. (a unit of Ayala Corp.), Sumitomo, and Macquarie Investments Holdings.

LRMC assumed operations and maintenance of LRT-1 in September 2015 under a P65-billion, 32-year concession agreement with the Light Rail Transit Authority and the Department of Transportation.

MPIC is one of the three key Philippine units of Hong Kong-based First Pacific Co. Ltd., along with Philex Mining Corp. and PLDT Inc. Hastings Holdings, Inc., a unit of MediaQuest Holdings under the PLDT Beneficial Trust Fund, holds a majority share in *BusinessWorld* through the Philippine Star Group. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

Cebu's Top Line opens eight new stations

CEBU-BASED fuel retailer Top Line Business Development Corp. said it has opened eight new fuel stations in Northern Cebu, expected to add up to 1 million liters in monthly sales capacity.

The openings follow the completion of renovations on its acquired fuel retail network, which has been rebranded under Light Fuels Express, the company said in a statement on Thursday.

The initiative is part of Top Line's broader per-cluster renovation and rebranding program covering stations in Cebu, Leyte, Siquijor, and Negros Oriental.

Renovations for three more clusters are slated for completion by the end of the year. Meanwhile, stations that have yet to be rebranded continue to operate and contribute to Top Line's revenue stream.

"The completion of our Cluster 1 renovation shows how we maintain quality in our acquisitions, reflecting our disciplined approach to optimize each station to operate at full capacity while maintaining efficiency and service quality," Top Line Senior Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer Brigitte Carmel C. Lim said.

TOP LINE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CORP.

"This cluster-based rollout allows us to scale systematically and capture demand in high-growth markets like Northern Cebu," she added.

According to the company, around 80% of Northern Cebu's fuel market consists of two-wheeled vehicles, which fall within the target market of Light Fuels Express.

Last year, Top Line acquired 38 retail fuel stations, a two-million-liter depot facility, and 15 fuel tanker trucks from Total Oil & Gas Resources, Inc. and Ballston Metro Corp.

It has set aside approximately P925 million for the acquisition and renovation of stations in Cebu and new locations, accelerating the rollout of its retail arm, Light Fuels, in the Visayas.

The renovated stations are expected to serve motorcycles and light vehicles in the municipalities of Medellin, Bogo, Daanbantayan, Tabogon, Sogod, Borbon, Catmon, and Carmen.

The rebranding initiative strengthens its market presence by establishing "a consistent and recognizable Light Fuels identity across its retail network."

Top Line started in leasing and real estate but entered the fuel industry in 2017. It is now active in commercial trading, depot operations, and retail fuel in the Visayas region. Through Light Fuels, the company introduced its first service station in Mandaue City, Cebu, in 2023. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Vitarich Corp. board approves Davao breeder farm acquisition

LISTED poultry integrator Vitarich Corp. (VITA) said its board has approved the final terms and conditions for the P280-million acquisition of breeder farm facilities in Davao del Sur.

"Following this approval, the definitive agreement and the implementing contracts and documents of the foregoing acquisition are expected to be finalized, signed, and executed within the month of February 2026," the company said in a disclosure on Thursday.

"The foregoing transactions are subject to customary closing conditions, such as execution of the definitive agreement and implementing contracts as well as full payment of the consideration," it added.

The deal covers Vitarich's acquisition of breeder farm facilities — including land, improvements, equipment; 125,000 common shares of stock; and advances of Broilers Club, Inc. (BCI) shareholders.

The total purchase price, based on third-party appraised value, was allocated as P95 million for 125,000 BCI shares, P130 million for BCI shareholders' advances, P25 million for land owned by two BCI shareholders in the breeder farm, and P30 million to pay off BCI's bank loan on one property.

Vitarich Corp. plans to operate the acquired breeder facilities as its own farm and make BCI a wholly owned subsidiary.

VITARICH.COM

The acquisition aims to stabilize broiler chick supply and reduce production costs, with capacity projected to boost VITA's total breeder output by up to 8%.

BCI is a private domestic corporation engaged in poultry and egg production, among others, with operations in Davao.

The Philippine Stock Exchange suspended trading of Vitarich shares on Thursday after classifying the recent board approval of the P280-million acquisition of BCI and breeder farm facilities as a substantial acquisition requiring further disclosure. — **Alexandria Grace C. Magno**

Key rate,
from S1/1

It likewise sees the economy expanding by 5.9% in 2027, lower than its earlier projection of 6.3%.

'MANAGEABLE INFLATION'

A still benign inflation outlook also provided the central bank with additional room to ease, even as it raised its projections amid emerging supply-side pressures.

"The outlook for inflation remains manageable," Mr. Remolona said. "Our forecasts do indicate a slight uptick in inflation this year, but this is due largely to supply-side factors. While these factors are largely temporary, they will require continued vigilance with regard to possible spillover effects."

Headline inflation returned to the BSP's 2%-4% target band after nearly a year as it accelerated to 2% in January.

The latest consumer price index was faster than the 1.8% recorded in December but softer than the 2.9% clip a year ago.

BSP Deputy Governor Zeno Ronald R. Abenoja said they now expect inflation to average 3.6% this year, higher than their 3.2% estimate in December.

For 2027, the central bank projects inflation to ease slightly to 3.2%, still above their previous forecast of 3%.

Electricity rate adjustments, costlier oil and the impact of the government's flexible rice tariff scheme on local rice prices will likely add inflationary pressures this year, Mr. Abenoja said.

However, he noted that price pressures from such supply-side factors "may not be persistent and could fade away after some period of time."

UNCERTAIN POLICY PATH

Asked how the policy path ahead looks now, Mr. Remolona said: "It's less certain."

He noted that consumer and business confidence is now a main concern, adding that the outlook for monetary policy easing would depend on how soon sentiment will recover.

"We see confidence will return very soon, in a few months. If we're right, then we won't need further cuts," Mr. Remolona said.

Earlier this month, the BSP chief said they were seeing signs of recovering confidence, citing improving activity in manufacturing and the stock market, as well as easing yields in government securities.

Mr. Remolona said the impact of weak confidence on the country's growth prompted the central bank to "give a bigger weight" to confidence.

"We're now in a situation where it's more conditional on what happens to confidence in growth," Mr. Remolona said. "Because in December, we were more confident that confidence would return pretty soon. And the lack of confidence actually turned out to be bigger than we thought," he added.

However, the BSP governor also said that they will stick to their price stability mandate, which means that keeping inflation low will remain a priority in monetary policy decisions.

"We support growth, and we do want growth. But at the same time, our main mandate is still inflation," Mr. Remolona said. "So, to the extent we can support growth without causing inflation, we will support growth."

Meanwhile, Metropolitan Bank & Trust Co. Chief Economist Nicholas Antonio T. Mapa said the central bank's inflation outlook will likely drive its policy path going forward.

"Market was split on the decision, but BSP opted to deploy support sooner rather than later. Any potential future easing remains contingent on the inflation outlook," he said in a Viber message.

"Monetary authorities also appeared to have an ardent focus on confidence building, hinting that the easing cycle could be extended for just a little longer," he added.

Capital Economics Deputy Chief Emerging Markets Economist Jason Tuvey sees scope for "at least" one more 25-bp reduction in the following months if the economy stays weak and inflation remains manageable.

"It's also worth noting that the BSP removed the line from its previous statement that 'the monetary policy easing cycle (is) nearing its end,' suggesting that it remains open to the idea of further loosening," he said in a commentary on Thursday.

"All told, if the economy remains sluggish and inflation contained, as we expect, there is likely to be scope for at least one more 25-bp cut to interest rates, to 4%, over the coming months," he added.

In a separate commentary, ANZ Research said recovering lost confidence may take time, but improved government spending will likely accelerate the process.

"Our assessment is that confidence will take time to return and will need to be supported by a revival in government spending," ANZ Research foreign exchange analyst Kausani Basak and Chief Economist for Southeast Asia and India Sanjay Mathur said. "Still, we will monitor developments in consumer and corporate confidence before reconsidering our current view that the BSP has completed its rate-cutting cycle."

The Monetary Board is scheduled to have its second policy review this year on April 23.