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LOCAL NEWS

Plan to approve illegal homes gets mixed reviews

Proponents call plan program of 'social justice'

By **MELANIE LENART**
Of the STAR staff

A plan to sanction homes constructed without permits in Río Grande's Punta Las Picúas drew both praise and criticism during a public hearing Thursday.

Those throwing their support behind the proposal included several of the 30 owners of the approximately 800 acres of land in question and Rep. Angel M. Cintrón García, who fashioned the law calling for the plan last year along with Rep. Salomón Rondón Tolléns. Both are from the New Progressive Party.

Those opposing it included Guillén Medina Fuentes, president of the Fishermen's Federation of Playa Picúa Inc., and leaders of various environmental groups from the eastern region.

While Guillén called the plan "the legalization of illegality," Cintrón labeled it as "a program of social justice."

The designation of the area as Río Espíritu Santo Natural Reserve in 1985 occurred after many of the landowners had purchased the undeveloped parcels from a company called U.S. Industries. The land is divided into 30 slivers of 25 acres each so that every piece includes beachfront property.

Most of the development has occurred on the coast, and the plan would restrain future inland development in the roughly 600 acres of mangroves, Cintrón said.

Miguel E. Herrero, a landowner and attorney who has fought for landowners' rights to build on their parcels, said he believed most landowners support the plan.

"It's reasonable for everybody involved," he said. "It's your property but you can't touch the mangroves."

The plan would permit construction of tourism facilities and piers for small boats in the mangroves.

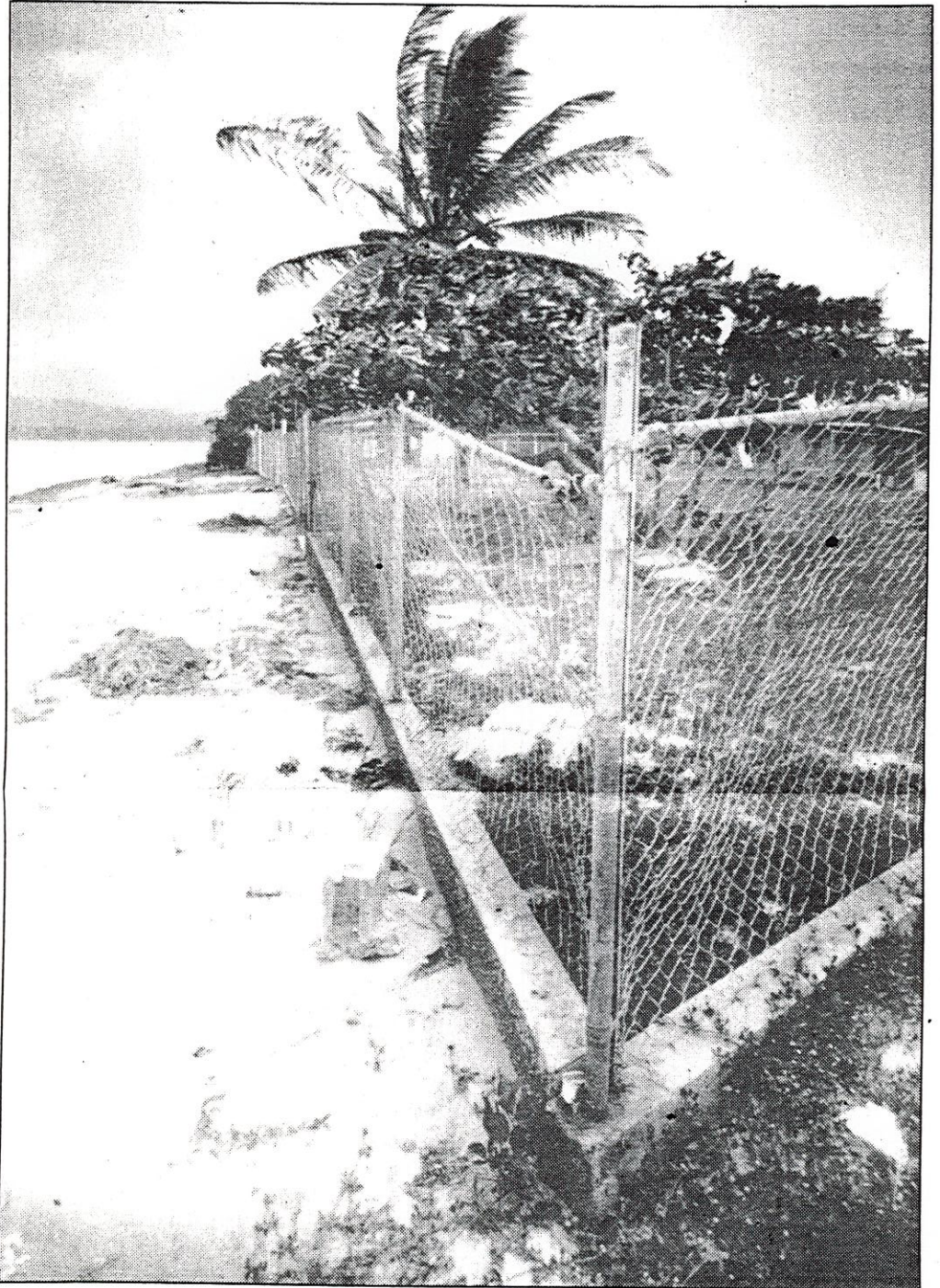
Herrero said he paid \$50,000 for an undeveloped 25-acre parcel. Lucy Vázquez said she and her husband purchased two parcels in 1987, an undeveloped one for \$30,000 and another one for \$95,000.

A \$1 million fund set aside in 1985 to repurchase the land when the area became a reserve would provide about \$33,000 for each parcel, if that option were pursued.

However, many landowners argue their land now is worth much more because of the 80 or more homes and other structures that now ring the peninsula.

Although the plan would give fishermen access to the beach in a zone that fluctuates between nine and 60 feet, the development serves as a barrier between the sea and the mangroves that support much of the area's wildlife, Medina said. The group intends to challenge the constitutionality of the law that led to the plan.

The fisherman pointed out that the Department of the Interior classifies the entire peninsula as a "coastal barrier" that protects the inland area from storms



STAR photo by Humberto Trias Jr.
This house is one of several that have been constructed at the Punta Las Picúas area of Río Grande, which is supposed to be a nature reserve.

and hurricanes.

"The designation as a coastal barrier establishes . . . that it's an essential habitat for species of fish and mollusks, which are commercially and recreationally important," Medina told the panel of five Planning Board employees studying the proposal.

A variety of reasons for protecting the region from development were described in the Planning Board document itself, which by law required input from the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources.

Page 11 notes that mangroves serve as nurseries for various species of crab, mollusks and fish "that have a great commercial value." The document does not specify the value.

It also describes how mangroves trap sediments carried by the area's rivers, thereby expanding the land at the same time they prevent erosion.

This land-expanding ability may be showing up in data provided to the board by Edwin A. Hernández, spokesman of the Organization of Environmental Groups of the East.

Hernández interrupted his doctoral studies in biology to prepare a 16-page analysis of the plan. He noted that overall, mangroves in the Río Grande area have expanded an average of 54 percent, while those in Punta Picúa have expanded only 7 percent.

Much of the expansion probably resulted from a shift away from an agricultural economy, he said, but some could be attributed to the wetlands' ability to stretch out into the water.

The Planning Board panel will discuss the six hours of testimony and inspect the various documents submitted before making a recommendation to the Planning Board, said Bijan Ashrafi, director of the design and land use division.