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INQUIRER SOUTHERN LUZON

# Inquirer Southern Luzon : Puerto Princesa rejects mining projects

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY – The ongoing nickel ore rush in southern Palawan may have attracted all sorts of mining investors big and small, dubious and legit.

But the roads leading to the reddish brown soil that Palawan's landscape is famous for just ended at the entrance to Puerto Princesa City, the province's capital and host to wide areas of high grade nickel ore.

On Aug. 21, Mayor Edward S. Hagedorn declared that he will not approve any of the pending mining applications in the city at least during the remainder of his three-year term.

At the same time, he called for the filing of a resolution in the city council that will declare a 25-year moratorium on mining in Puerto Princesa City.

"If the mining companies can show me a place with intact forest cover and where people have become wealthy and healthy after a massive mining operation, I might change my mind," Hagedorn told the Inquirer.

Hagedorn was reacting to questions on how the city government will respond to reported offers for assistance of major mining companies eyeing to put up nickel ore mining operations in Puerto Princesa City.

"The ugly sight of the denuded forests of Sta. Lourdes and the mercury mine tailings that were dumped along Honda Bay only strengthens my resolve to oppose mining operations here in Puerto Princesa," he added.

Hagedorn explained that the recent conversion of Puerto Princesa City into a highly urbanized charter city allowed it to be administratively independent of the provincial government and gave them the power to deny with finality all small-scale permit applications previously approved by the Provincial Mining and Regulatory Board (PMRB).

Small-scale mining permits are awarded by the PMRB.

In the case of Palawan, it is being utilized by big mining companies to start up large-scale mining operations, ostensibly because it is easier to acquire compared to large-scale permits given by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Hagedorn's announcement effectively turned down reported overtures from several major mining companies, including Atlas Consolidated Nickel Mining Corp., whose subsidiary, Berong Nickel Mining Corp., is eyeing to set up operations near Ulugan Bay overlooking the St. Paul's Subterranean River National Park.

Nickel deposits are located on the western coast of the city.

Individuals have also been granted by the PMRB mining claims over nickel areas around Barangays Napsan and Bacungan.

Tourism and agriculture

Instead of jumping into the southern Palawan bandwagon where all municipalities embraced mining investors with open arms, Hagedorn said they have mapped out "a strategic plan to boost our tourism and agriculture sectors."

"In line with our sustainable development vision, we can only promote two major industries—tourism and agriculture. That is why we are allocating more funds to enhance our tourism program," Hagedorn said.

City tourism officer Melinda San Juan Mohammad said they were investing on a plan designed with the assistance of the Asian Institute of Management to boost the city's tourism receipts by at least 30 percent over the next three years "as a short term goal."

"Our target is to develop ecotourism as a major economic activity. We aim to increase tourism receipts by at least 30 percent and yet maintain a low volume of tourist traffic," Mohammad said.

From an annual tourist arrival average of 150,000, Mohammad said they were conducting promotional activities to attract 650,000

tourists in the next three years.

She explained that their plan will be boosted by the ongoing upgrading of the Puerto Princesa City Airport into a full-fledged international airport.

Mohammad also noted the potential of newly discovered attractions in the city, including whale shark and dolphin-watching tours.

“Our whale sharks and dolphins are getting very good media attention. We expect this attraction to really get lots of visitors,” she added.

City agriculturist Melissa Macasaet also said their development plans have focused on increasing the current productivity of the sector and the promotion of export crops such as cacao and cashew.

“Our main goal is to address poverty and reduce its incidence,” Macasaet said.

She said they were also promoting the planting of oil palm in open areas of Puerto Princesa City to popularize the industry.

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