

# Boracay rehab plan now with Palace for action

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The Philippine Star · 4 Apr 2018 · 8 · By ALEXIS ROMERO – With Cecille Suerte Felipe, Catherine Talavera, Paolo Romero

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The environment, interior and tourism departments have submitted a detailed proposal on the rehabilitation of Boracay Island, an issue that may be discussed during today's Cabinet meeting, Malacañang said yesterday.

In a text message, Senior Deputy Executive Secretary Menardo Guevarra said "the final action on Boracay may be taken up at the (Cabinet meeting)."

Last February, Duterte likened Boracay to a pool of human waste because of lack of sewerage system and threatened to close the island if the problem is not addressed.

Duterte said local officials who failed to solve the environmental woes of the tourist spot are liable for neglect of duty.

The Departments of Environment and Natural Resources, the Interior and Local Government, and Tourism have recommended a six-month closure of the island starting April 26 to allow its rehabilitation to take place.

Malacañang, however, asked the three agencies to come up with a detailed recommendation because they only submitted a two-paragraph letter.

Look at the long term

The trade department has suggested that the closure be done in phases to cushion its effects on the livelihood of residents of the island.

Officials have also assured Boracay stakeholders, who are opposing the closure of the island due to its impact on tourism and jobs that the government will consider all implications before coming up with a final decision.

Philippine Tour Operators Association Inc. (PHILTOA) president Cesar Cruz earlier called for the closure of the island to be moved to June during the monsoon season instead of this month to avoid affecting too many tourists and businesses during the peak months.

Interior and Local Government Assistant Secretary for plans and programs Epimaco Densing said in a television interview the estimated P18-billion to P20-billion revenue losses to be incurred during the closure must be viewed visà-vis the sustainability of the island in the long term.

Densing, who claimed he was involved in the investment banking industry before he was appointed by Duterte to his post, said the island must heal and become a truly world-class tourist destination.

Densing said the closure would come before the "LaBoracay" parties on April 27 to May 3 where "about 30,000 to 40,000 tourists in a day, plus 20,000 to 25,000 residents," would converge in the island. Densing said the government agencies investigating the case of Boracay were also supportive of the declaration of state of calamity to fast-track the massive rehabilitation program in the area. At the same time, Densing said they are working closely with the Philippine National Police (PNP) to enforce the shutdown once a decision is made.

"We are doing the details of the whole guidelines of not getting them (tourists) enter the island," Densing said.

In a media briefing Tuesday, National Economic and Development Authority national policy and planning staff director Reynaldo Cancio said the closure would have minimal impact on the economy.

“...at the macro level it’s not going to be significant, the most is something like 0.1 percent of GDP (Gross Domestic Product),” Cancio said.

“That’s the current estimate but that would depend really on the assumptions that you use,” Cancio added.

NEDA officer-in-charge Rosemarie Edillon said they have submitted their proposal, analysis and recommendations on the Boracay issue to the Office of the President, but she is not at liberty to discuss details.

While the closure of the island may not significantly affect the economy on a macro level, Edillon said this will have a greater impact on the municipality of Malay in Aklan.

Edillon said there has to be proper timing and coordination in coming up with a contingency plan and other possible employment opportunities for those who will be affected by the island’s closure.

The NEDA official also expressed hope that the closure would happen during the lean season to minimize its adverse effects.

Tourism Secretary Wanda Teo said her department will work with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to address the stakeholders’ issues.

She said the interagency task force is coordinating with the DOLE and is set to meet Boracay stakeholders on April 9 to help the workers to be displaced by the closure.

“The hotels that we talked to said they’re not even going to close... They’re going to rehabilitate their hotel, so not a lot of workers will be displaced. Some will be working, some will be helping with the rehabilitation,” Teo said.

Meanwhile, in terms of flights to Boracay, Teo said her department has spoken with air carriers to allow passengers bound for Boracay to refund or rebook their flights without being charged cancellation or rebooking fees.

While the interagency task force has recommended the closure of the island for a maximum of one year, Teo earlier said she hopes for the closure to last around two months to minimize the impact on the tourism industry.

“After that, we’re recommending to the President to set up the Boracay Development Authority because after the (rehabilitation), we might go back to zero again,” Teo said.

#### Legislation needed

The Senate is expected to pass legislation that will allow the national government to have a greater role in managing Boracay, Sen. Cynthia Villar said yesterday.

Villar, chair of the Senate committee on environment, said the panel will hold another hearing next week on the environmental degradation of the world-famous tourist attraction.

“Our hearing this time will no longer be on whether to open or close Boracay because it’s obvious that the executive (branch) will decide whatever they will do with Boracay,” Villar told reporters.

“But we will try to solve the problem long term by passing legislation on how to manage Boracay well,” she said.

She said there are proposals in the Senate to create a body that will be jointly run by the national and local governments.

Villar and other senators earlier pointed out over-development, corruption and failure of local officials to enforce environmental and sanitation laws led to the degradation of Boracay.

Senate Minority Leader Franklin Drilon earlier proposed the creation of the Boracay Island Council to “help ensure that the island will continue to exist with functioning ecosystem, under a workable plan for sustainable development.”