

MASTER PLAN FOR QUEZON MEMORIAL CIRCLE ON HOLD DUE TO MRT 7 CONSTRUCTION

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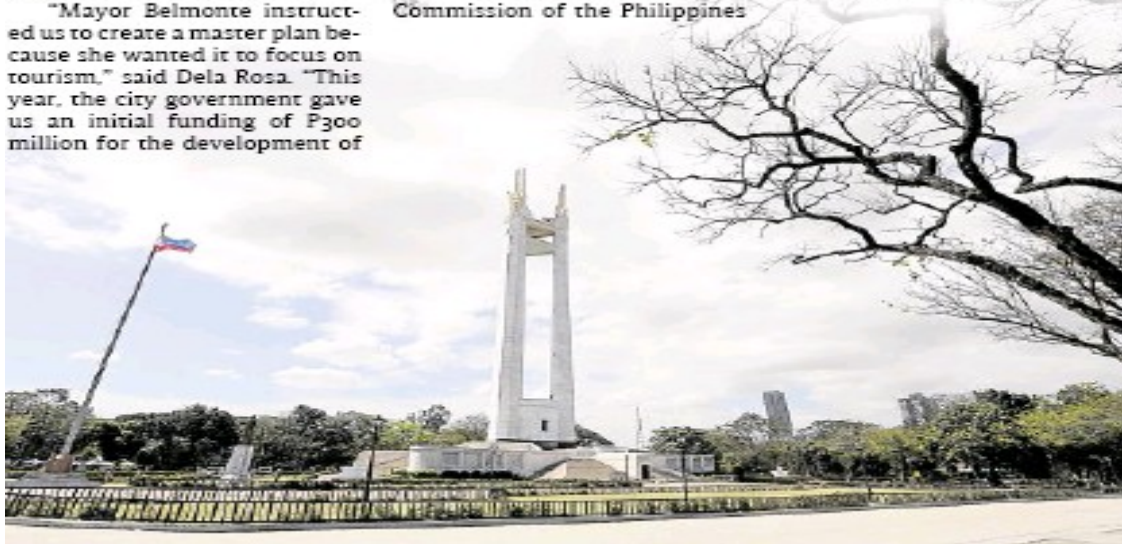
At the heart of Metro Manila's largest city, a 27-hectare national park located inside an elliptical traffic circle attracts an average of 14,000 visitors a day—with the number doubling on weekends.

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The Quezon Memorial Circle (QMC), which features a shrine of President Manuel L. Quezon with an art deco theme, continues to be the city's top recreation space for residents and tourists, said park head and action officer Zaldy dela Rosa.

But as modern cities embrace urbanization, the park administration was put in a conundrum: How can they build a greener and more sustainable national park?

The solution, said Dela Rosa, was to craft a new master plan for the Circle, as residents fondly refer to the park.

The ongoing construction of the Metro Rail Transit (MRT) 7 QMC station, however, has thrown a spanner in the works.

"The finalization of the master plan is in stalemate because of the QMC station. We don't know how much land the construction would really occupy," Dela Rosa told the Inquirer. "When they first presented the MRT project to the city, they said it would only take up a small portion as it would be built underground."

But now, the above-the-ground construction for the project has encroached on the park's jogging lane.

The roadwork has also led to heavy traffic in the area, reducing by over 10 percent the Circle's monthly income of P5 million, Dela Rosa said.

Following complaints from historians and environmentalists, Mayor Joy Belmonte last week ordered a temporary halt to work on the MRT 7 station "because it would affect the landmark's identity as a national heritage park."

The contractor, EEI Corp., had indicated around 4,997 sqm as the project's floor area. But the city government recently discovered that the actual site was now over five times the size of the approved figure.

In a statement on Feb. 19, the Department of Transportation (DOTR) and San Miguel Corp., MRT 7's concessionaire, promised to present a new, "mutually acceptable design" for the station within 10 days.

Win-win solution

Belmonte said that while the city government supported the Duterte administration's project, it would look for a "win-win solution" to "protect the city's open spaces while advancing the welfare of thousands of commuters."

On Dec. 26 last year, the Department of Tourism and city government decided to work together to develop QMC into a more sustainable tourism site.

"Mayor Belmonte instructed us to create a master plan because she wanted it to focus on tourism," said Dela Rosa. "This year, the city government gave us an initial funding of P300 million for the development of the Circle, but we cannot put up new projects pending the approval of the master plan."

During the term of former Mayor Brigido Simon Jr. in the late 1980s, Dela Rosa said the city entered into a tripartite agreement with the National Historical Institute (NHI), now the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP), and Development (NPDA).

Under the agreement, NPDA took over management of the park, but the area covering the Quezon shrine was placed under NHI'S jurisdiction.

The NPDA later turned over management of the park to the Quezon City Parks Development Foundation which was authorized by the city government to look after it and raise revenues for maintenance.

"If there are structures that need to be built, we are in charge of that. But once that master plan is approved, that will be our main reference in building new structures," said Dela Rosa.

According to him, P30 million has been allotted for the park's maintenance expenses this year, almost thrice its budget during the previous city administration.

The park raises around P50 million in revenues annually, mostly from parking fees and the rent coming from restaurants and vending stalls. Entrance to the Circle remains free.

Among the park's mainstays are 62 stalls selling ornamental plants and flowers. Most of them, said Dela Rosa, had come from the Manila Seedling Bank, which was

shuttered in 2013 for lack of a permit.

Daily exercise classes

For those who want to join zumba or aerobics sessions, there are classes held daily at the garden gazebo starting at 6 a.m.

Over the last few years, however, museums have become the park's newest attractions, including the Quezon City Experience Museum built in 2015 and the Museo ng Demokrasyang Pilipino in 2019.

In August 2018, the NHCP inaugurated its Presidential Car Museum on what used to be the basketball and volleyball courts. The museum which stands on a 3,000-sqm lot houses the official cars of past Philippine presidents.

But Dela Rosa maintains that despite having more than 100 structures and stalls inside the park, 70 percent of its total land area remains open spaces.

"Every structure here must be related to former President Quezon or the city's history," he said. "We have the Quezon Heritage House, which is the actual house of the Quezon family in New Manila. The World Peace Bell and the Philippine-Israel Friendship Park are special markers in honor of Quezon."

Stalls, on the other hand, must offer or promote local products and culture.

"They say we are turning the park into a concrete jungle, but we have to create parking spaces and cemented walkways for park goers," he added. "That's why the focus of the new master plan is to have more greenery."

It has been a longstanding vision for the city, said Dela Rosa, who has been with city hall for 42 years. When he started working for the city government at 19 years old, there were no trees in QMC.

As head of the city's parks development and administration, he saw it slowly turn into a green space over the years.

Once the talks between the city, DOTR and MRT 7 stakeholders were finalized, Dela Rosa vowed to finish the master plan that would make QMC a "world class national park."