NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Mike Makes Pals in Puerto Rico

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SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

San Juan, Puerto Rico — Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg met yesterday with the governor of Puerto Rico and came out in support of two major issues being pushed by the island's political leaders.

Bloomberg, who was elected with help from New York's Latino community, said he supports the island's efforts to win federal tax incentives for industries operating here.

He also said that he supports a Navy withdrawal from Vieques but suggested that now may not be the right time for such a move.

"We're at war," Bloomberg said during a joint news conference at the governor's mansion. "We are sending our sons, our children abroad to fight and we must provide them with the best training available."

Gov. Sila Calderon, who before the Sept. 11 attacks supported a prompt withdrawal of the Navy from Vieques, has softened her stance and now is backing an earlier presidential directive calling for a Navy exit no later than May 2003.

When asked if their support for the U.S. war on terrorism would include reinstating live ordnance training on Vieques, Calderon declined to comment and Bloomberg said he supported President George W. Bush.



AP Photo

Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg and Puerto Rico Gov. Sila Calderon dance to traditional "plena" music during a visit to a bilingual school on the island yesterday.

Navy officials have requested using live ordnance in training missions planned for January. Congress is expected to take up the issue in the coming weeks.

Bloomberg, who will be sworn in as New York City mayor on Jan. 1, flew to Puerto Rico late Monday afternoon after visiting the Dominican Republic and meeting with the families of people who died when American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in Queens on Nov. 12.

He and Calderon met to discuss issues that are important to Puerto Ricans in New York and on the island. They also visited the Padre Rufo Bilingual School in Santurce, where they danced to the *plena*, a traditional music of the island's highlands.

Bloomberg said the bilingual school might offer answers on educating New York's Latino children, who often do not speak or write English.

The Padre Rufo School is designed to accommodate Puerto Rican children who return to the island without a working knowledge of Spanish.

"I'm interested in how they do," Bloomberg said. "New York City has the second largest concentration of Puerto Ricans anywhere."

Bloomberg also compared some of the problems of Puerto Rico, which has a 12 percent unemployment rate, with those of New York City.

"The economic health of Puerto Rico has a direct impact on the New York economy," Bloomberg said. "There is an enormous movement of people and resources. I can learn a lot from her and her experience with these issues."

NEWSDAY, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2001

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