

# ATENAS TODAY



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***ATENAS TODAY** is a free English language newsletter for the residents and potential residents of Atenas, Costa Rica. It contains informative articles and creative compositions submitted by our readers, and is distributed via email approximately once a month to over 350 email addresses. To get on the distribution list or to submit material, please send an email to Fred Macdonald at [fredmac222@yahoo.com](mailto:fredmac222@yahoo.com).*

*Compositions from back issues are archived by category on the Atenas Chamber of Tourism and Commerce website, [www.atenascatuca.com](http://www.atenascatuca.com). Click on the English version and then [Atenas Today](#) on the business page.*

## Requiem

*by Diane Holman*

All that I write is a lament for what we have lost:  
a knowing of the fecundity of the earth, and of women  
offering breasts to babies.

We all believe, today, that effort must be made to survive.

In a universe of unending time,  
none of us has enough time.

On a planet of green and blue, we struggle against scarcity.

Our religions tell us that this is because of a fault in us,  
but this cannot be so.

We are born babies with the ability to smile, for heaven's sake.

At one time we felt safe here—all our Paradise tales tell us so.

Woe unto those who have made us fearful!

May they die enclosed in walls of money,  
and never know the taste of joy.

# **Report on Atenas Zoning Plan**

*by Marietta Arce*

Greetings to all of you!

Before composing what will be a lengthy summary of the current status of the Zoning Plan, I have reflected and sought inspiration and clarity. I endeavor to present an unbiased and non-judgmental document. I beg your indulgence and hope that you will accept my efforts generously and that you will share them with any and all you think might be interested in what is going on in our town. It has been a long process and it is far from concluded. We need citizen participation so that we have a real 'development' plan not just a 'building code'.

I will begin by briefly reviewing the entire process. Around the year 2000, due to alarming, rapid and uncontrolled urban growth in our country and the problems stemming from this, the government of CR issued a decree aimed at guiding the institutions responsible for formulating a National Development Plan for the country and more urgently for the Greater Metropolitan Area (GMA) comprised of 31 cantones. Five districts of Atenas (Atenas Center, Escobal, Concepcion, Mercedes and Jesus) are included in the GMA.

Between 2000-2003, the existing 1982 zoning plan was reviewed, and it was deemed necessary for it to be revised. In 2001 the National Counsel for Urban Planning (CNPU) was created. Its members are planning ministers, MOPT, MINAE, INVU, IFAM & CNFL, institutions in which we have put our trust over many decades and on which we rely to uncover and resolve our various problems (water shortages, energy crisis, infrastructure, etc.). During this time, Phases 0-2 of the National Development Plan 2002-2012 (NDP) was also taking place with the participation of officials at the National Level.

By mid-2003, Phase 3 of the NDP is being entered into and that is the first time that we are introduced to PRU-GAM (Rural/Urban Planning for the Greater Metropolitan Area) and told that its permanent members are the Mayors of San Jose & Vasquez de Coronado, representing the GMA of San Jose Province; the mayor of Alajuela, representing the GMA of Alajuela Province (the districts of Atenas included here); the mayor of Heredia, representing the GMA of Heredia Province, and the mayor of Oreamuno, representing the GMA of Cartago Province. These are the representatives of the 31 cantones mentioned previously.

The budget for Phase 3 is a total of 18.5 Million Euros, 11 from the EU and the other 7.5 from Costa Rica. The work that concerned us (Atenas) began in 2004. Because CATUCA has a 'quality of life' heading as part of its mission statement, we felt the onus was on us to be proactive in the process from the very beginning. From 2004-2006 PRU-GAM was busy at the regional level and we attended several workshops for about 15

months. We requested some changes (more lead time, better 'marketing', clear materials, etc.) but never felt really taken seriously. We demanded a more transparent, coherent process but met subtle rejection to our suggestions. In spite of all this, we were firm in insisting that we had a right and a duty to be included in the process for the sake of our members and the citizens at large. After the 15 month process, we were reminded that we had been participating in a **regional** effort and that the **local** effort would begin in the early months of 2007! We persevered.

The first workshop for the **local** portion of the zoning plan began with a poorly-announced and poorly attended workshop on June 2, 2007 at the Parish Hall. We were introduced to IDOM, the Spanish company hired by PRU-GAM to conduct the local level workshops for the 31 cantones. IDOM's 'team' for us consisted of a geographer, two sociologists and an architect who would be with us for the next 15 months or so to help us plan our 'vision' for Atenas. This first workshop was dismal and we hoped for a better outcome at the next one which was scheduled tentatively for some time in September 2007.

The date for the second workshop changed several times but it eventually took place on December 5, 2007 at the Lion's Club. This second workshop had attendance of about 40 people and very valuable input was received from those participating. We were told at the conclusion of the evening that the changes we requested had been noted and would be reflected in the materials handed out at the third and final workshop before end February 2008.

By March 2008, nothing had happened and CATUCA repeatedly phoned, wrote, etc. with no positive results. We finally requested and received an audience at the Municipality and were told that the workshop would be held on April 29 at the Municipality. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, the workshop began and it was noticed that **none** of the changes previously requested had been incorporated and the participants and presenters engaged in heated verbal exchanges that preempted any attempt at civilized discussion. The meeting was adjourned and rescheduled for May 10<sup>th</sup>. That date was later cancelled and rescheduled for June 14<sup>th</sup>.

On June 14<sup>th</sup>, about 50 people from Atenas attended the third and final workshop, the last opportunity they had to participate in this process. Most of those present have followed the long road that got us here and were discouraged to see that not all the changes were incorporated as hoped; that the printed materials were of poor quality and that the cartographer hired by IDOM to update a map, complete with a legend has not finished this vital part of the project. The 'team' was unable to show us exactly where things were and what things meant and we were not given the opportunity to discuss things until we felt clear about them or to request additional workshops in the future.

IDOM now goes back to their offices, makes the appropriate changes, and submits the revised work with their recommendations to the Municipality. Once in the Municipality, the materials can be freely accessed by all with a simple request to the

people in charge at the Municipality who are obligated by law to distribute the material. The problem is knowing when it is available, but we will follow-up.

This 'tentative' local zoning plan becomes enforceable after the town of **24,000** inhabitants is called on to participate in a 'referendum' to vote for or against a proposal that **50** or so participants in workshops have suggested they need or want!

So, we can see that it will be some time before our 'issues' are really addressed. And what are **some** of those issues?

Our infrastructure is collapsing.

Our 'protected' zones are being violated on a daily basis.

Our citizens are suffering involuntary water rationing.

Crime and domestic violence are on the rise.

Our youth (the largest group of citizens) are deprived of activities and places to satisfy their needs for community participation and self-expression.

Our schools are in disrepair.

We have no proper recycling program.

We are courting a kind of 'tourism' previously unknown in our canton.

We have no proper waste management program.

Drug use is alarmingly high.

....these are just a few, I am sure you can think of your own.

I am an optimist by nature. But I am also a realist. I have lived long enough to know that non-participation is still participation. I still believe in people and I hope that more of you will begin to take the first steps toward becoming more proactive in this process. We need more voices of reason; we need for the process to become democratic and transparent. Do not make the mistake of believing that your one vote or suggestion doesn't count.

Please join us in creating a reality of the Atenas we envision so that in a decade we can look back at all we have done and not look forward to the 44<sup>th</sup> workshop with IDOM....

Thank you.

Marietta Arce Valverde  
8395-3923//2446-8950  
marietta\_arce@yahoo.com

NOTE: If anyone needs or wants exact dates, websites, etc. please contact me and I will be happy to provide you with more information. I welcome any and all feedback.

## Atenas Today Interviews Lee Rodriguez

*Atenas Realtor and Owner of La Mirador Restaurant*

**AT:** I understand you are Colombian.

Lee: Yes, I was born and grew up in Bogotá.

**AT:** Tell me about you life there?

Lee: My mother was only eighteen years old when I was born. I did not know my father. From age five to age seventeen I lived in a boarding school for girls.

**AT:** That must have been very hard. Did you ever meet your father?

Lee: Once. When I was twenty-three I visited Columbia and looked for him. We had lunch. That was the only time.

**AT:** When did you leave Colombia?

Lee: When I was seventeen my mother got a job as a live-in housekeeper in Scarsdale, New York, and she moved to the U.S. I was left in the boarding school in Colombia and was not happy. I wanted to see the world and be with my mother. My aunt helped me forge a letter from my mother authorizing the school to let me leave. She then helped me to get a visa, and I flew to New York. When I arrived I remember seeing snow for the first time.

**AT:** Was your mother glad to see you?

Lee: She was afraid her employers would not like her having a child in the house, but it turned out that the people really liked me. There were two young children and I became their friend. Of course, at that time I spoke absolutely no English. The six year old had great fun teaching me the English words for things around the house.

**AT:** Did you help your mother with the housework?

Lee: Yes, from the very first day. In fact my mother had a trip planned and shortly after I arrived she left me there to do her job. Apparently I did it OK, because the people gave me \$50.

**AT:** What did you do with the money?

Lee: (Laughs) I bought a wig. My straight black hair did not work for me in Scarsdale.

**AT:** What happened next?

Lee: Mother got a better paying job doing clerical work, and we moved to an apartment in White Plains. I began working as an aid in a nursing home and went to a school at night to learn English. For a year and a half I took care of five elderly ladies in the nursing home, and I became very attached to them. When one of them died I was devastated. The nursing home got me psychological counseling and wanted to send me to be trained as a registered nurse. However that was the point that I fell in love and life took off in a new direction.

**AT:** Who was the lucky boy?

Lee: He was not exactly a boy. He was thirty-six, and I was eighteen. He had come to New York from Germany and had become a successful contractor. I loved his clear, blue eyes and thought he was very handsome. My mother believed he was good for me, and she helped the romance by translating my Spanish into English so that we could arrange our dates. We were married five months later.

**AT:** What was he like?

Lee: He was very shy and very Germanic. Everything had to be just so. Our personalities were not at all alike, but for a time we were very happy together. For our honeymoon he took me to Disneyworld in Florida. It was 1971, the first year it opened.

**AT: Where did you live?**

Lee: My mother and I moved in with him in a house in Queens. He was making a lot of money and I didn't really have to work, but I wanted to. I got a job in Manhattan with Middle East Airlines; then after six months I moved to Avianca, the Columbian airline. For eight years I worked in their office and eventually became the manager. I got free tickets and my husband and I traveled all over the world.

**AT: Did you enjoy your work?**

Lee: It was the best job I ever had. I decided I needed more education, so I went to Hunter College at night and got my Bachelors in Business Administration.

**AT: Where you continuing to live in Queens?**

Lee: No, my husband started a new business in Manhattan selling hot tubs and Jacuzzis, and he bought a brownstone where we had a showroom on the first floor and lived on the upper floors. It was a time when these products were fashionable, and the business did very well.

**AT: Did you work in the business?**

Lee: I wanted to keep working at the airline, but my husband bugged me to quit and come manage the showroom for him. It was during this time that I had two children, both boys. When they began to get older we decided to leave New York for a more family oriented place. We sold the business and the brownstone and spent three months driving around the country. My husband liked Colorado, but I wanted to be near the ocean.

**AT: Where did you end up?**

Lee: Santa Rosa, California, about an hour north of San Francisco. We bought a beautiful big house with lots of land. It was gorgeous. I decided to try my hand at real estate and went to work for Merrill Lynch.

**AT: I expect you were good at it.**

Lee: Yes, but it wasn't easy. Most of the realtors had lots of contacts in the area. I had to go knock on doors—everyday I spent two hours just knocking on doors. But in the end I was the Rookie of the Year in an office with 73 agents. With my commissions I was able to buy my own Jaguar.

**AT: Sounds like the ideal American life.**

Lee: Unfortunately no. My husband and I were so different in age and temperament that we could not stay married and be happy. Not long after we settled in California we got divorced. I moved from our big house into a spec house that we had built nearby. The boys spent half time with me and half time with him.

**AT: How did you get from there to Costa Rica?**

Lee: Santa Rosa had a very active Spanish Club. It was there that I met Magda and Anna, both of whom now live in Atenas. Ann's family owned property in Atenas, and we all came here on a visit. I loved the town and happened to see a house for sale on Calle Alvarado. I had just sold my Jaguar and had the cash so I bought it.

**AT: Are you always so impulsive?**

Lee: I believe that life is always opening up in front of you and that you should follow your heart, or as some people say, "go with the flow."

**AT: Did you move right away?**

Lee: No, I still had the boys to consider, but about five months after my divorce I met Romy, who was from San Salvador and also a member of the Santa Rosa Spanish Club. We got married, and Magda supplied the flowers for the wedding from her flower shop in Santa Rosa. Romy wanted to build a hotel, and we decided to start a new life together in Costa Rica. My boys were older and wanted to stay in the US with their father.

**AT: Was that the beginning El Cafetal Inn in Atenas?**

Lee: Not at first. Our original plan was to build a hotel on the beach at Esterillos, and we bought some land there. We had an architect draw up complete plans for a small hotel for that location. But by the time we were ready to start construction I was pregnant with my daughter Tatiana, and the idea of living on an isolated, hot beach did not seem so appealing.

**AT: What happened next?**

Lee: At just that moment we came across the beautiful property in Atenas where we ending up building Café Tal. We actually used the same architectural plans that had been drawn up for the beach hotel. Romy is very creative and resourceful, and we managed to establish the business with very little capital. At the same time I began selling Atenas real estate.

**AT: How did the El Mirador del Cafetal Restaurant get started?**

Lee: Romy and I were always looking for new challenges. There was a very shabby old bar on the highway just west of Atenas that the owner wanted to sell. It had a spectacular view and enough land to be able to expand. Romy and I bought it and gradually upgraded it into the restaurant it is today.

**AT: What's happened to the hotel?**

Lee: The hotel has also been greatly expanded and now has a first class restaurant. Romy is living there and managing the hotel, and I have built myself a house on the Mirador property and am managing that restaurant. Romy and I have decided to go our separate ways.

**AT: What kind of meals do you feature at the Mirador?**

Lee: We are open for breakfast and lunch every day. So far I am not doing dinners, but that may come. On Sunday mornings from 8:00 to 12:00 we have a special brunch buffet for 3,500 colones. Starting at 8:30 there is live guitar music. Our new terrace hanging out over the edge of the mountain provides a great setting.

**AT: You have certainly had a varied and exciting life.**

Lee: I have been so fortunate. There has never been a time when I did not enjoy life. When I was a little girl in Columbia my nickname was "music box" because I was always singing and happy. Who knows what good things are just around the corner? My motto has always been: KEEP EMBRACING LIFE.

## The Determined Diner Returns

Back again to report on three more dining experiences recently had in Atenas. It's amazing how new opportunities just keep coming along!

The first was last Thursday at ***Rick's Internet Café***. Rick has reinstated his Thursday night dinners and this was the first of many, we hope. This particular night we dined on a tasty brisket of beef with oven roasted potatoes and salad. Dessert was carrot cake. The dinner was served buffet-style and if you wanted an alcoholic beverage, it was BYOB. The place was jammed (mostly with Gringos), and the mood was very festive. Some of us ate with our plates on our laps, but that didn't deter us from enjoying both the food and the company. The next dinner will be July 3, when the menu will be BBQ pull pork sandwich, cilantro-avocado potato salad, corn, and desert. The cost is 4,000 colones if paid in advance, 5,000 if paid at the door. Call Rick for a reservation (essential!).

Kay, of ***Kay's Gringo Postres***, has returned to work after a medical leave and seems to be just full of energy to try a new thing. She's offering, as of this week, a daily lunch special for a price of between c2500-c4500, depending. Some of the dishes that were enjoyed this week were: *frijoles Santa Ana with short ribs, chiles rellenos, carne en salsa, and Tom's special tomato soup with grilled cheese sandwich*. The day we went, the special was *pollo en salsa*, a savory combination of chicken, tomato sauce, and mushrooms. Confetti rice and steamed vegetables were on the side. One of us liked it so well, he (hint) practically licked the plate! If you're craving a hamburger, the regular lunch menu is still in effect, as well. Lunch is served 12-5, Monday through Saturday.

If you haven't visited the soda, ***Las Tres Hermanas***, you must give it a try. It's a small place, located right across the street from supermercado Canario. The day we went it was full of people, both at the 3 tables and the counter seats that fill the homey space. No menu, of course, but I'm guessing every day you can choose from what we were offered: carne en salsa, chicken, fish or beef, all served with the *casado* accompaniments of *yucca picadillo, arroz blanco, frijoles, and ensalada de repollo*. The chicken, so tender it fell off the bone, was just fine, but it was the fish that stole the show. Lightly fried, just right, it was the best I've eaten in Costa Rica, bar none. All in all, a great meal, and for only c1500. Those three sisters definitely know what they're doing!