Puerto Rico Realtor urges NAR to lobby on island’s behalf

Ivan Zavala, the CEO of Puerto Rico’s largest brokerage and past president of the Puerto Rico Association of Realtors, is urging the National Association of Realtors (NAR) to lobby for the repeal of the Jones Act, a marine law dictating that all goods being delivered between U.S. ports be carried by American-owned and operated ships.

In effect, the law known formally as the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, requires that Puerto Rico pay double the cost for goods from the U.S. mainland than neighboring foreign islands as it copes with the worst disaster in its history brought on by the unforgiving Hurricane Maria, which charted a direct course over the island a week ago.

Homes lay in ruin as seen from a U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Air and Marine Operations, Black Hawk during a flyover of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria September 23, 2017. Photo by Kris Grogan

Zavala joins Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, who called on the Homeland Security acting secretary Elaine Duke to waive the act to save the island precious funds. (McCain has actually tried to repeal the bill on several occasions).

The Jones Act has already been waived twice by the Department of Homeland Security in the last month to help U.S. states stricken by hurricanes, and Puerto Rico, as an American territory, should be given the same treatment, McCain said in a letter to Duke.

Realtor describes impending ‘human catastrophe’

Zavala has just sent an email to his main contact at the National Association of Realtors, executive committee member, Mike Ford, describing just how badly the island was suffering.

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“We entered into the ‘humanitarian crisis’ and if we don’t receive the appropriate assistance *now*, I fear that we will reach a ‘human catastrophe’ level,” Zavala wrote. “Our senior citizens, baby boomers, veterans and the elderly population are stuck in their houses, without water, electricity or internet.”

Zavala said the Puerto Rico Association of Realtors, who he is sharing an office with while his remains powerless, share his sentiments.

Among its many other issues, the Jones Act is impeding the assistance of other nations wanting to help the island, Zavala said.

Ivan Zavala

“We need our lobbyists and all the NAR leadership to support a moratorium on the Jones Act until Puerto Rico overcomes this crisis for a minimum of one year,” he added.

NAR had not responded formally to Inman's request for comment by press time but was looking into the issue.

Ford urges agents to ask Congress for year-long waive

Ford, speaking from his Coldwell Banker Heritage Homes office in Arkansas, said he hoped to get to Puerto Rico as soon as he could to help the community there.

The 2015 VP of NAR has visited the island several times in the past few years doing consulting work, and he's had numerous conversations with Zavala since Hurricane Maria hit.

Not speaking on behalf of NAR but rather as an individual, he said, Ford urged agents to contact their congresspeople and ask them to push for a year-long waiving of the marine law without delay, rather than relying on NAR for lobbying power.

"It's better than one organization," he said. "Congress has a tendency to listen to its constituents. I would encourage readers to remind them that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens. And this can be done very quickly legislatively."

Ford said the San Juan international airport and port had both sustained a great deal of damage, and though supplies might be making their way to the island, destroyed roads make getting supplies to communities very difficult.

Every inch of the island had been affected, said Ford, and as such, the recovery is likely to be slow. Agents on the island should avail themselves of NAR's Realtors Relief Foundation funding, he advised.

"I think part of what we have to remember is this is the biggest storm ever to hit any part of the United States and, unlike Texas and Florida, who had all kinds of neighboring states to look to for help, for Puerto Rico the nearest U.S. neighbor is close to 1,000 miles away," said the NAR executive committee member.

Zavala, a Leading Real Estate Companies of the World member, said he had only managed to reach 30 percent of his brokers so far post-hurricane. The number of families who lost their homes is in the thousands, Zavala expects, and real estate values have been heavily impacted on the island. He anticipates the market could potentially lose around $20 billion in real estate value.

He stressed that he still had hope.

"We will rise again, stronger than ever," Zavala said. "I am confident that our story will be told by professors in universities, professors in history, psychology and economics, on how we overcame probably one of the worst crises that 3.5 million American citizens have experienced.

“And it became, not the best place in the Caribbean to live, but the best place in the world to live and to raise your ‘familia.'”

Email Gill South.

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