



PUERTO RICO SURI

Project Highlight

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

It is a peaceful Sunday afternoon in late October 2016. El Morro, the Spanish-turned-American fort, stands silently at the island's tip as children and their families fly kites in the wind off the harbor. The breeze provides some relief from the sun and humidity, and the clouds in the distance promise an afternoon rainstorm.

One mile southeast of El Morro, the team for the Sistema Unificado de Rentas Internas project—referred to as the SURI project—puts the final touches on a new tax administration system. In a few days, Puerto Rico's Departamento de Hacienda—the Department of Treasury—will fully process the island's sales and use taxes in the new system. Later, the system will become the foundation that supports the island through two major hurricanes (Irma and María), El Apagón (an island-wide blackout lasting nearly 70 hours), an earthquake swarm including 11 earthquakes over magnitude 5 and one magnitude 6.4 quake, and a worldwide pandemic.



Sistema Unificado de Rentas Internas

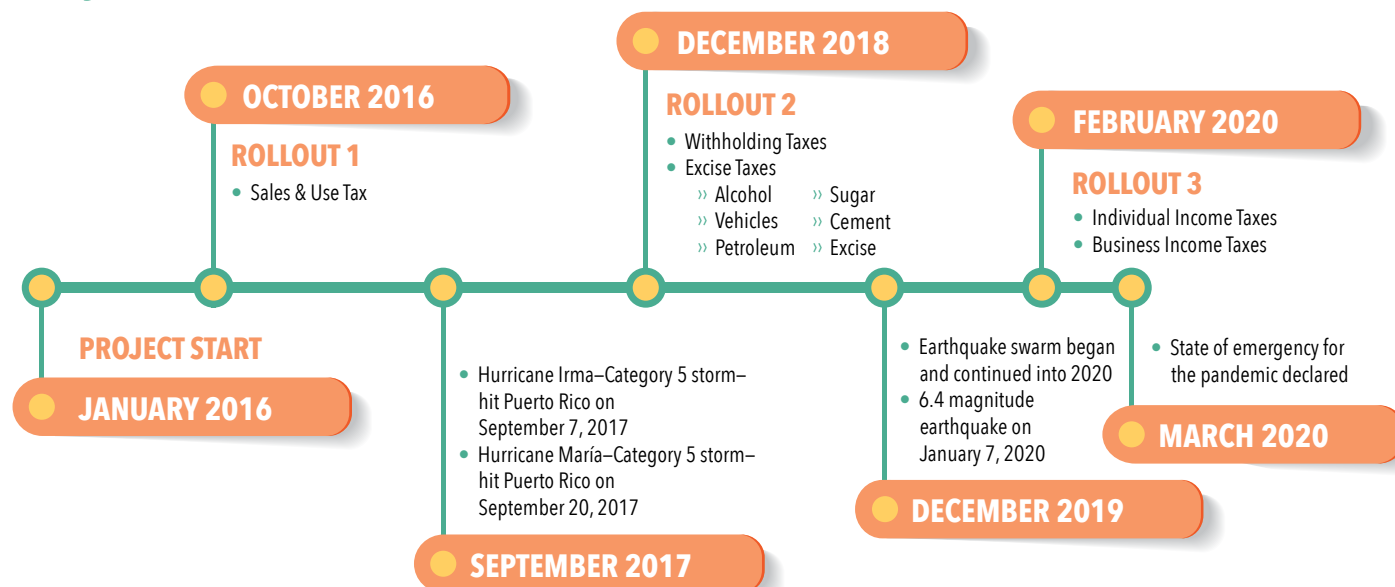
Between 2016 and 2020, Departamento de Hacienda, or Hacienda for short, worked with Fast Enterprises to replace their aging tax systems as part of the Sistema Unificado de Rentas Internas (SURI) project. Roxanna Santiago Ortiz, Assistant Secretary of Internal Revenue, explained their motivation, “We wanted to digitize all our tax types, not only for our employees, but also for our taxpayers.”



“We are part of the Department of Treasury history. This is something that will be written in books.”
– Johanna Rohena,
Hacienda Project Manager

The project implemented GenTax, enabling Hacienda to digitize their tax types in a single system. The project also implemented an online service system sharing the project’s name, SURI, where Puerto Ricans can view all their tax information and easily communicate with the agency. Via the SURI project, Hacienda modernized and replaced Puerto Rico’s siloed tax systems, improved online self-service functionality for the island’s nearly 3.2 million citizens, and distributed billions of dollars in pandemic relief.

Project Timeline



Adapting Through Disaster

The project faced herculean challenges during implementation but overcame them by adapting quickly and leveraging the flexibility of the new systems. “A Category 5 hurricane, a chain of unexpected earthquakes, followed by a worldwide pandemic. Every challenge became an opportunity to prove that the change of technology was the right move,” explained Eduardo Palacios, Database Administrator for Hacienda.

Hurricane María made landfall as a Category 5 storm on September 20, 2017. Striking just two weeks after Hurricane Irma, María devastated the already damaged island.

“The hurricane put a stop to everything. There was no power—even the agency was working off a generator,” said Marcos Magallanes, FAST Implementation Consultant. Almost immediately, GenTax and SURI were leveraged to support hurricane recovery. “Three weeks after María, a crew was working out of a conference room with an emergency light and laptops,” said Ryan Taylor, FAST Project Architect. “Emergencies necessitated getting things done—we were doing rapid response development so the ports could introduce goods to



Eduardo Palacios

the island,” Ryan continued. As Hacienda and the SURI project responded to the hurricane, they proved that they could be relied on in challenging times. Ryan said, “We were succeeding in times of emergency and were able to make rapid changes to respond.”

The next disaster occurred just two years later, when a series of over 9,000 earthquakes shook the island starting

in December 2019. The quakes forced Hacienda employees and the SURI project team to work from home and to adapt to a new set of working conditions. “We developed online

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“Even if I’m a small grain of sand, I’m contributing to a better Puerto Rico.”
– Eduardo Palacios,
Database Administrator for Hacienda

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communication processes and learned how to work as a team remotely,” explained Marvin Garcia, a FAST Conversion Manager.

When the COVID-19 pandemic closed the agency’s offices in March of 2020, Hacienda and the project team were prepared. “We had contingency plans. Having that experience prior to the pandemic really gave us a leg up,” Marvin said. As they had done in previous times of trouble, the project quickly pivoted to address the challenges brought on by the pandemic.



Benefits

The integration of several systems into one has helped Hacienda open communication across the agency.

“You now have just one data source, with a very capable system that allows you to have a big picture of who the taxpayer is. It allows you to see like an x-ray so you can now make better decisions,” said Eduardo Palacios, Hacienda Database Administrator.

Providing information online and enabling taxpayers to contact the agency directly via SURI has drastically improved communication.

“Now, with SURI, we can send massive notifications. People like that because they are more informed. They can also write to us through SURI, and we can communicate back with them,” said Johanna Rohena, Hacienda Project Manager.



Taxpayers can now perform many tasks online instead of visiting one or multiple agency offices.

“Now, they don’t have to go to the agencies. When they have their SURI account, they can log in to so many services and to all the taxes. Now, they just need to go to one place,” said Johanna Rohena, Hacienda Project Manager.

SURI shows taxpayers their actual balances and transactions, so it is clear what is owed and why.

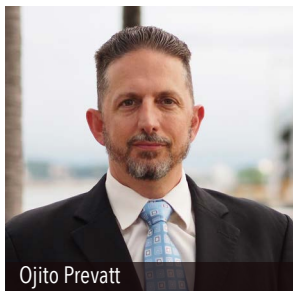
“You can log in every day and see what is going on with your account. When we can provide a clear picture of your account, you can feel better about complying with your requirements,” said Sara Vázquez, Subject Matter Expert.

To streamline the import process, an online filing option was added to collect sales taxes.

“Those benefits were important from an impact perspective. Especially after a hurricane, you want to get goods off the boat as quickly as possible because there are people who are desperately in need,” said Joe Lohmeier, FAST Conversion Manager.

Pandemic Response

Just one month post-rollout, Hacienda pushed back tax filing due dates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and developed a series of relief programs to provide support and payments to the groups most affected. These included programs for self-employed individuals, front-line medical workers, students and teachers, people experiencing homelessness, small and medium businesses, and the tourism industry. Many of these relief programs were managed in the GenTax and SURI systems since they could be quickly configured to confirm eligibility and distribute funds. Eduardo Palacios, Database Administrator for Hacienda, said, “If we weren’t running GenTax, it would have been impossible to respond as quickly as we did.”



Ojito Prevatt

Angel Pantoja Rodríguez, Sub Secretary of Hacienda, explained Hacienda’s decision to leverage the GenTax and SURI systems, “Our priorities were clear once the

“*I think SURI and the project will bring benefits to the island for generations to come.*”
– Ojito Prevatt,
FAST Technical Team Manager

pandemic hit—we needed to use this platform and use all the resources that we had to help families here in Puerto Rico.” Having the flexibility to make rapid changes to the GenTax

and SURI systems meant Hacienda could distribute aid to Puerto Ricans quickly, providing much-needed support during the pandemic. Angel said, “SURI gave Puerto Rican families food on their plate. It was a blessing to have the opportunity to complete this project before the pandemic hit. The platform basically saved the economy—saved the wellbeing of Puerto Rico.”

Fostering Change

When Johanna Rohena joined Hacienda, she dreamed of modernizing their decades-old legacy systems. However, she was skeptical that it would ever happen. “Until I saw it, I didn’t believe it. We had been looking for this for so long,” said Johanna, who is now the SURI Project Manager. Hacienda staff were accustomed to working with legacy systems and workflows and were hesitant to welcome new processes or tools. Close collaboration between project members and Hacienda employees was needed to foster positivity and help the agency adapt to the new system and updated business processes.

“From the get-go, we knew we had to get more Hacienda employees involved,” said Angel Pantoja Rodríguez, Sub Secretary of Hacienda. Agency leadership were at the forefront of this involvement, and their frequent use of the system helped encourage users who were reluctant to change. As Roxanna Santiago Ortiz, Assistant Secretary of Internal Revenue, said, “You have a Secretary, a Deputy Secretary, and the Assistant Secretary of Internal Revenue who know about the system, use the system, and they show that to the employees—and the employees are impressed.”



Sara Vázquez

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*“The people who worked
on the project are very proud
of what we achieved.”*

– Sara Vázquez,
Hacienda Subject Matter Expert

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Hacienda also encouraged involvement through a mentorship program, which pulled knowledgeable agency staff from their business units to work as system testers and trainers on the SURI project. These testers and trainers became familiar with the new system and shared that knowledge with their peers back in their business units. “End users could ask for all the information they needed,” said Sara Vázquez, Hacienda Subject Matter Expert. As users became more informed, the project shifted from answering the users’ functionality questions to fielding their requests for system improvements. Johanna now describes the implementation as a “dream come true,” and others in the agency agree. Roxanna said, “The Puerto Rico Treasury Department, it’s a totally different department—not only our system, but the environment. The employees want to know, they want to learn.”

Project Name

*Sistema Unificado de
Rentas Internas (SURI)*

Project Type

GenTax

Project Dates

*January 2, 2016 to
February 10, 2020*

Agency Name

*Departamento de
Hacienda*

Agency Motto

*Integridad,
Lealtad y Justicia
(Integrity, Loyalty, and Justice)*

Population

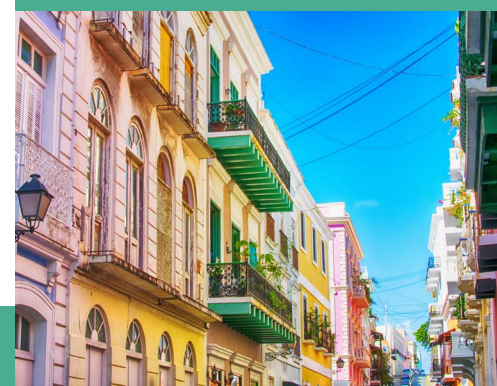
3.2 million

Capital

San Juan

Fun Fact

*Home to the only
rainforest in the US
forest system: El Yunque*





From left to right: Roxanna Santiago Ortiz (Assistant Secretary of Internal Revenue), Francisco Parés Alicea (Secretary of Hacienda), Pedro Pierluisi (Governor of Puerto Rico), Angel Pantoja Rodríguez (Sub Secretary of Hacienda)

Informing the Public

When implementing the new system, the SURI project needed to ensure transactions at the ports could continue without pause so perishable goods could be released and delivered before spoiling. “With that real-time need, Hacienda did a lot to make sure that their taxpayers were prepared and knew the system,” said FAST Conversion Manager Joe Lohmeier.

Hacienda project members provided system demonstrations for tax preparers, CPAs, and taxpayers through both YouTube videos and two in-person seminars. Project members also attended multiple CPA association meetings to answer questions and talk about the new system. Hacienda Subject Matter Expert Sara Vázquez said the live system demonstrations were a “huge highlight for Hacienda.”

When the new system went live, taxpayers were eager to log in. “Before we even announced to the public that we rolled out, we already had thousands of taxpayers

clicking on the link trying to register,” said FAST Team Manager Pavan Musunuru. It wasn’t long before SURI was a household name. After the system went live, agency leadership were regularly televised through press conferences and other media appearances with SURI-



Pavan Musunuru

“Our project name, SURI, is a brand across the island. Everyone identifies with SURI and 70% of the tax-paying population has a SURI account.”
– Pavan Musunuru,
FAST Team Manager

branded backdrops to show support for the project. A tax incentive for businesses also boosted public awareness of SURI. Businesses that sold prepared foods and

beverages were able to drop their sales and use tax from 11.5 percent to 7 percent if they were registered with Hacienda’s SURI online services system and were tax-compliant. The 4.5 percent reduction benefitted patrons and business owners alike. Now, large 7s on SURI-branded certificates in shop windows advertise the reduced taxes. FAST Project Architect Ryan Taylor said the credentials are “displayed as a badge of honor, even at the McDonald’s drive-through—right below the speaker.”