

On My Mind  
1/15/99

As long as the Legislature is facing unpopular but necessary actions (like repealing the 30% retirement bonus allowance) it ought to take a look at the homestead program as well. Just as the 30% bonus was meant to be a temporary measure - in that case, highly politically motivated - presumably, so was the homestead program intended to be but a temporary measure.

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It is crystal clear, after all, that giving **every** islander a free 900 square meter piece of land is an impossibility. Sooner or later, there just won't be any more public land left to give away. Public land that might more appropriately have been used for agricultural purposes, to maintain natural habitat and green space, to protect ground water, to build schools on, or for airport expansion, would simply no longer be available.

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However, rather than shutting down these programs overnight - killing them outright at some point - wouldn't it make a lot more sense to reduce the programs gradually? To try to wean people from the expectation of these programs little by little? In the case of the retirement bonus, the percentage of the bonus could be reduced - from 30% to 20% the first year, to 10% the next year, and then eliminated. That would give people time to adjust their expectations, and their plans.

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In the case of the homestead program, requirements could be more strictly enforced, eligibility made more restrictive, so fewer and fewer people would be entitled to homesteads. That may sound cruel, but does anyone know of any another country, anywhere in the world, where the government **guarantees** free land to every one of its citizens forever? The amount of land available in the CNMI is fixed, it can't be expanded, and the sooner government policy recognizes that, the better.

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If plans are made - and carried out - now to phase out the homestead program, it won't face the crisis that the 30% retirement bonus faces: having to take drastic action immediately, rather than in a more reasonable fashion.

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It appears, though, that top public land officials feel continuing to provide homesteads is more important than preserving the environment, in particular, in providing habitat for birds - see the Division of Public Lands Director's comment: "Birds fly around. They can just fly to Pagan for heaven's sake or a conservation site in the Northern Islands," in Monday's *Variety*.

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Birds, however, are not merely decorative or melodious. They play an important role in our daily lives, consuming bothersome insects as their food, and distributing useful plant seeds through the waste from their digestive systems. Some are also used for food.

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One would think that with birdless Guam so close, people would be more aware of the importance of bird life to the survival and continuance of the natural environment.

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The amount of confusing, erroneous, or missing information in local newspaper articles can be downright frightening. To cite just one example, both paper carried stories, this past week, of CUC's intention to hold an "environmental forum" on proposed construction of a water desalination plant. CUC plans to charge those residents who would receive water from the desalination plant for the additional cost involved in producing the water, and, for the second time, is asking for public input on the issue.

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One thing not made clear is the significance of the method being proposed to desalinate the water. One method, distillation, involves the use of heat and evaporation. This could result in hot water being flushed into the lagoon - a significant environmental hazard. The method being proposed, however, is reverse osmosis. This method does not generate hot water, but extremely salty water, or brine, which, however, will also have to be dumped somewhere.

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Another issue not made clear is that the justification for charging costs only to the recipients of the desalinated water, rather than to all users of the water system, is that the water from the desalination plant will be drinkable from the tap. Only the actual recipients of the desalinated water will benefit from the quality of the water.

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The CUC Board Chairman is quoted as saying that desalination is the only alternative to water shortages. Again, this is not quite accurate. If the amount of money slated for construction of the desalination plant were instead devoted to the construction of water catchments, for instance, there might not be a water shortage at all. Moreover, it apparently still holds true that a significant amount of water now being produced is lost through leaks "on the consumer side." How much of a projected water shortage would there be if those were fixed?

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Then there's the "throw-away" phrase in the <I>Variety's</I> story that it is waste water that will be desalinated. The story refers, on the front page, to a "waste-water desalination plant" being built and later in the story reports that a recent study recommended that "a reverse osmosis plant that will recycle used water be built to augment current production capability." What's not clear is whether the waste water treated by reverse osmosis is the same "potable" water for which consumers are being asked to pay premium prices. (By the time I'd read that, it was too late in the day to seek clarification.....)

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All of which just goes to prove the old adage that one can't believe all one reads in the newspapers.

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The insistence of Department of Interior and other Washington, D.C.-based officials that the

CNMI should be punished for its alleged labor violations in the face of protestations from those on the home front that the charges are grossly exaggerated strikes me as somewhat similar to the insistence by Washington, D.C.-based officials that President Clinton be impeached despite the protestations from those on the home front, so to speak, that Clinton's alleged "crimes" do not rise to the level of impeachment.

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Unfortunately, those who continue to believe that Clinton is doing a good job as president and should not be impeached don't have a voice - except remotely, through Clinton's attorneys. The CNMI is more fortunate, in that sense, since the chief executive is not alone, but has the backing of both the legislature and the private sector.

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What impact the suit just filed against CNMI-based garment manufacturers and related retailers will have on the CNMI's battle against Washington remains to be seen.

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Re-cycling of solid waste, except for aluminum cans, is not practiced in the CNMI. To some extent it has to do with being small islands - there isn't enough demand on-island to make use of re-cycled materials cost-effective, and sending the waste off-island for re-cycling is too expensive.

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Now the Department of Environmental Quality is trying to change that - at least as far as hazardous wastes such as used motor oil, batteries, pesticides and fertilizers are concerned. DEQ is asking people to identify what wastes they'd be willing to re-cycle, apparently in preparation for establishing a re-cycling program for the wastes.

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I'm not sure to what extent all that waste is actually going to be put to use in some other form - that is, literally RE-CYCLED, but whatever happens to it, controlling its disposal, and keeping it from contaminating the ground, and ground water, are worthwhile efforts in their own right.

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A material I'd always thought could be re-cycled on island is glass. While government of Guam's glass crusher has sat idle since 1994, the one at Anderson Air Force Base has been in operation since early November of last year. Among options for its use: landscaping, covering underground utility lines, in road-paving.

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To quote the president of the Recycling Association of Guam, "We need to keep in mind that much of the value in re-cycling is not in the market of the materials but in the avoided costs of landfilling or incineration." Shouldn't the CNMI be taking another look at re-cycling as it gets ready to finally open its new landfill?

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If you've found this column of interest, won't you share it with a friend, or colleague? Thanks!

