

On My Mind  
4/2/99

I've never stopped to buy any of those alternately strange or tempting vegetables and occasional fruits from the road-side vendors who've begun making their appearance on island. I worry that the vendors themselves may not have health certificates, and that the foodstuffs they're selling may not be free of contaminants.

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Of course, I don't know that the food-handlers - those that pile up the oranges and the potatoes in the grocery stores - have health certificates either, nor do I know that the foodstuffs for sale there are necessarily free of contaminants.

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But I, at least, have faith in "the system" in that regard. As part of ostensibly reputable and licensed businesses, the employees are supposed to have health certificates; the food is supposed to be safe.

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However, there's no such assurance in regard to the off-street vendors. And there's no employee health certificates, or any other documentation of their legitimacy, on display. Thus, I'd be all in favor of better control, closer monitoring of such vendors.

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But to argue - as is being done - that steps should be taken to "discourage" the farmers, whose produce is being sold by the off-road vendors, because they are usurping local farmers, is sheer nonsense. Obviously, there is a market for fresh fruits and vegetables, and obviously, it seems to be a remunerative market - a market that is worth pursuing. If it weren't, those trucks wouldn't be out there.

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There's nothing to stop local farmers from doing the same thing, from pursuing the same market.

But - for whatever reason - they did not, and have not, done so. Nor is there any evidence that local farmers would be willing or able to sell to the same market as the off-road vendors are doing. Among other things, most local vendors don't know the language spoken by most of the customers of such street-vendors.

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By all means, collect the required fees, collect the appropriate taxes. But don't wipe out the truck farmers who were entrepreneurial enough to come up with mobile, at-your-door, produce markets just because the local farmers didn't think of it first.

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As Ed Stephens (a <I>Saipan Tribune</I> writer) put it recently, "You can't make a non-productive worker productive by making a productive worker non-productive."

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The CNMI Visitors Authority thought of it first, but in this case, it may be an idea that shouldn't have been thought up at all. In an attempt to attract publicity, the MVA is proposing to get into the Guinness Book of Records by sponsoring "the world's largest dive" - which it anticipates would establish a record for the most people entering the water at one time for a single recre-

ational dive.

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According to a recent report in <I>Pacific Daily News</I>, the MVA hopes that as many as 350 divers, to be accompanied by between 100-150 certified dive-masters and instructors, would all jump into the water at the same time at the site of the Chinsen wreck in the Saipan Lagoon. At least the MVA has scaled down its goal - at one time the plan was for 1,999 - or 2,000 (depending on whom one talked to) - to do the dive at one time in observation of the millennium.

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Even so, it boggles the mind. 500 divers would require somewhere between 25-50 boats (depending on their passenger capacity) all anchored at the same wreck at the same time. Given the current, they should all actually be anchored on the same side, at the same end, of the sunken cargo ship. Clearly, the site cannot accommodate that. If the boats circle the wreck - in which case, a lot of divers won't even get near the wreck, since the current will pull them in the opposite direction - the thought of what all those anchors will do to the wreck, to what little coral is still left in that area, is pretty gruesome.

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The idea wouldn't be quite so laughable if the dive were to be in open water over a sandy bottom, at a site with little or no current. There the boats could line up - in a ring, for example - without endangering anything or anyone, and the divers could even all meet under water, hold hands to form a circle. But one still must ask: are there 500 safe, certified scuba tanks on island? Are there 100-150 certified dive masters and instructors?

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The ocean is a hostile environment. It is not user friendly. To consider deliberately exposing so many people to risk seems very fool-hardy.

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At the very least, shouldn't MVA be required to obtain a CRM permit? After all, if the relatively harmless act of filming requires a permit, isn't it logical that an event putting at risk such a large number of people would also require a permit?

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Representative Faisao has proposed a constitutional amendment that would change the term of House members from two to four years. Just the thought leaves me feeling disenfranchised. There's lots of hoopla and grandstanding - and lots of fancy rhetoric - for the gubernatorial elections held every four years. People are often swept into office riding the shirt tails of whatever party leader made the most extravagant promises.

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Once the term of office is underway, however, the hoopla, grandstanding and rhetoric tend to fade away; the extravagant promises sometimes turn out to be empty promises instead. With mid-term elections, voters are at least able to exert some influence on the political scene, to change some of the players, if the way government is going is not to their liking.

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But as I understand it, under Faisao's scheme this would no longer be possible, since there would

be no mid-term elections.

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In addition to providing for mid-term corrections, a two-year term of office offers new members a relatively painless way to decide whether this particular political role suits them. Two years is a far shorter commitment than four.

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Admittedly, having to run for office every two years can be burdensome. Yet U.S. House members are still doing so. On a national level, it would appear that both voters and elected officials believe the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

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I would feel somewhat less disenfranchised if Faisao's proposal provided for staggered terms for the members of the House - with one-half being elected at the time of the gubernatorial elections, and the other half at mid-term. That wouldn't quite achieve the degree of "mid-term correction" that being able to vote for all of the members of the House at mid-term does. It wouldn't even allow voters to reject representatives, at the end of two years, whose performance hadn't met their expectations. But if everyone else feels that a four-year term is better than a two-year term, then at least let the terms be staggered.

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A faithful reader called in to let me know that I goofed in last week's column. There are not three "C" holidays, there are four: Citizenship Day, Commonwealth Day, Constitution Day, and Covenant Day. All the more reason to declare just one "C" holiday!

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And in hind-sight, it didn't speak all that well for my sense of priorities to cite, as the first example of how broadening off-island travel could be, a different way of maintaining the cleanliness of restrooms. Not that clean restrooms aren't important - especially in a tourist setting.....

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But that's all that I had space for - in that column. There IS more to come.