

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

Seems the gremlins are still with me. Not only did my computer go on the fritz again just as I was ready to work on the column - for the second time in two weeks - but another factual error crept in as well. The CNMI Senate is composed of three senators per district, not two. I knew that....

Mid-term election are four months away, almost too late, unfortunately, to pass and put into effect the proposed election reform bill, House Bill 11-115. So it looks like elections will once again be conducted based on a law that was passed more than twenty years ago when the CNMI was still a district under Trust Territory law rather than a Commonwealth.

House Bill 11-115, introduced by Representative Heinz S. Hofschneider, and co-signed by Representatives David M. Apatang and Melvin O. Faisao back in February of 1998, keeps much of the original District law, but adds several significant provisions to strengthen, clarify and elaborate upon the existing law. Perhaps the most significant change is an entire section dealing with election campaigns and campaign offenses, which attempts to ensure that votes are ethically and honestly cast, without bribe, promise, or threat.

Another new section specifies the powers and duties of a newly-constituted Election Commission's executive director, and would remove the Commission from the Civil Service system. Another major new part deals with the determination of residency.

Maintenance of an up-to-date and accurate register of eligible voters is addressed by the bill, as are campaign contributions, campaign fund accounting and campaigning itself.

The bill would take contested elections out of the hands of the Legislature, giving them to the courts instead, and would increase most of the fines for violation of the bill's provisions. It would make anyone convicted of a felony ineligible to run for office unless fully pardoned. Those switching parties while in office would no longer be allowed to retain their seat - either in the Legislature or on the Commission.

One problematic provision: the list of those entitled to cast absentee ballots does not seem to include anyone off-island for reasons other than work, business, military service or illness. Another: it makes no mention of the need for time, staff or funds to educate voters on such things as legislative initiatives, but neither does it assign the responsibility elsewhere. Another potential problem: the bill provides for equal representation of both the Republican and Democratic parties on the Election Commission, rather than according to the relative size and strength of the parties.

The bill proposes a number of other modifications to the existing law. The above is by no means an exhaustive list of them all.

Passage of the bill would certainly simplify the administration of the next election, but unfortu-

nately the time remaining is not enough to disband the existing Board, reconstitute a new Commission, and put in place all the other changes that have been proposed. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to enact the bill into law now, while elections are on people's minds, so that it is sure to be in place for the elections two years from now.

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A proposed bill that should not be passed in its present form is Senate Bill 11-61, which proposes to eliminate housing benefits for CNMI government employees. The purpose of the bill - to provide equity in compensation of CNMI government employees regarding housing benefits - is praiseworthy. Not only should government workers - and all workers, in fact - be given equal pay for equal work, but they should also receive equitable benefits. Senate Bill 11-61, however, does not meet that goal.

Though the housing market is far different than it was in TT days, when rentals on the open market were practically non-existent, housing opportunities are still not equal for all government employees. Some local residents live on family land, and were given family help in building their houses. Others were given homesteads, and may again have been given family help in building their houses. Not all such residents face monthly rent payments. Even if they took out loans to build their houses, their houses belong to them, constitute real assets.

Off-island hires, on the other hand, have no opportunity for such benefits. Unless they are provided government housing, they have no choice but to rent on the open market. They can never hope to own their homes, to build equity in them. Originally, the provision of housing benefits to off-island hires was an attempt to give them equity with local residents.

Unfortunately there are no statistics to show the extent of the existing inequity.

Before an attempt is made to provide equity in housing benefits among government employees, a study should be made to determine just how much discrepancy there is in what local residents pay for housing, and what off-island hires are being charged for housing. If it is found that there is little difference, discontinuing housing benefits for off-island hires would be fully justified. On the other hand, if there is a significant difference - and very likely there is - equity could, and would, be achieved by providing as housing benefit only the difference between what local resident employees pay and what off-island hires are charged.

But to categorically, across the board, stop all housing benefits for all off-island hires is nothing less than punitive. Moreover, to delete housing benefits in contract renewals without any increase in level of pay - as Senate Bill 11-61 proposes to do - is even more outrageous, since this, in effect, imposes a substantial cut in pay on the off-island hire.

To proceed without a solid basis of fact is not only discriminatory, but also poor law-making

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Talk of tipping fees (Guam's acting governor vetoed Guam's proposal for tipping fees in an argument about how many yards of trash equate to a ton - according to a <I>Pacific Daily News</I> article earlier this week) reminds me of a book I read a while ago - the name of which I've forgotten - on the economics of ecology. It recommended that manufacturers be held responsible for the disposal of items they produced, once the items they'd produced had outlived their usefulness.

The CNMI could apply that principle here. For example, the garment factories - whose left-over scraps are, apparently, contributing substantially to the growth of the Puerto Rico dump - should be made to pay for the cost of the disposal of those scraps. The Ports Authority, and its contractor who dredged the harbor, could have been made responsible for their "contribution" to the growth of the dump.

Charging tipping fees, it seems pretty obvious, is a strategy whose time has come.

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It's hard to comment on the current brou-ha about street names when the list - or maps - that the street-naming task force has come up with, was never posted in the public places it was supposed to be - like the Capitol Hill Post Office.

Sounds, though, like the point of having streets identified, which is to help simplify delivery of mail as well as emergency services like ambulances and fire trucks, has gotten lost in a morass of petty jealousies. The real question is - or should be - what is going to make those street names easy to spell, pronounce, remember?