

On My Mind
by Ruth L Tighe

One could be impressed by the zeal with which the CNMI government is attempting to control the display and sale of tobacco pursuant to recently-passed Public Law 11-88. Cigarettes may now no longer be sold individually, their display is severely limited, and customer access to single packs of cigarettes is now virtually impossible. All, supposedly, in an effort to cut down on the purchase of cigarettes by minors. Which, in turn, is presumably prompted by a desire to prevent minors from smoking and thereby endangering their health. Very laudable, to be sure.

But it all seems just a little disproportionate when one looks at other items on the market that are far more damaging, not only to the health of minors, but to the health of people of all ages. Beer, wine and liquor - when consumed to excess - can be harmful, if not lethal, not only to the consumer, but also to anyone nearby. And age is not a factor. Consumption of beer, wine and liquor can endanger the life of young or old, be they consumer or victim.

Yet these alcoholic beverages are readily available in any store. They are available in convenient single-serving size. Beer is sold by the single can, liquor can be purchased by the "nip" bottle, wine by the half liter. And all are readily accessible on convenient, open shelves. Single cans of beer are even available in the cold drink cases - pre-refrigerated and ready for immediate guzzling.

Why are there not similar controls on the sale and visibility of these items? With our jail overflowing with DUI offenders, with spouse and child abuse rampant, with alcohol-related automobile accidents and fatalities a common occurrence, why hasn't similar legislation been passed to limit access to alcoholic beverages?

There is, apparently, effort underway in the legislature to do just that. The question, of course, is whether the effort will be successful, given the influence of the alcoholic beverage distributors on island. Will the legislature be able to achieve consistency and rationality, have the fortitude, to pass an equally restrictive law controlling the sale of alcoholic beverages?

One could also question why priority was not given first to the more lethal substance.

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Speaking of legislative fortitude, it would appear that such fortitude is lacking, at least insofar as being responsible for the members' individual expenditure of funds is concerned. According to press reports, legislators are upset that the Secretary of Finance won't simply initial their requests for funds, but is asking them to follow the rules, and account for previous funds before spending more.

Apparently it is their unhappiness with such treatment that has led them to pass a legislative initiative that would amend the CNMI Constitution to provide them with their own Finance Secretary, separate and independent from the existing office. To "balance" things out, the

legislative initiative would also establish a separate finance office for the judicial branch.

Pundits have opined that that might not be a bad idea. If the legislators chose to be irresponsible in expending their funds, and if their finance secretary allowed them to do so - and, being chosen by the legislators, he/she would have little alternative - and if the legislators then found themselves out of money long before the end of the fiscal year, they'd have no one to blame but themselves. And, no doubt, could be expected to promptly pass another legislative initiative, to return to the status quo.

Saner thought, however, argues against establishing separate finance offices to begin with. It makes no sense whatsoever, particularly in light of the present state of the economy, to propose setting up triplicate offices of finance - with triple staffing, triple facilities, triple supplies and equipment. Government, at the moment, can barely afford to maintain the services it now offers.

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A second constitutional amendment has also met the requirements for being put on the ballot in November, and there is talk that there might be at least one more. Which is all very well and good, since it gives to the people the power to decide whether or not their Constitution should be amended.

The problem is that there still is no established vehicle for ensuring that the public be adequately informed about what it is they are voting on. There is no requirement that the Board of Elections provide voter education for proposed amendments. There is no requirement that each amendment that makes it to the ballot be accompanied with the means and a mechanism for providing complete, unbiased, objective voter education.

It is irresponsible to propose amendments without adequate voter information programs. The pros and cons of most proposed amendments are not usually self-evident. Moreover, the CNMI Constitution, as the backbone of the CNMI, should not be tampered with lightly. Yet the legislature continues to propose constitutional amendments through legislative initiatives in support of its own interests.

Who will take the initiative to see that impartial, credible, voter education takes place? In the absence of formal mechanisms, the media could fill this role. But will it?

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From the "how others do it" department: A notice "for the record" in a recent issue of the <I>Boston Globe</I> read as follows: "Correction: Because of an editing error, a caption accompanying a photograph in last Thursday's A section incorrectly identified the subject as Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori. The photograph was of a former Peruvian Supreme Court Justice, Moises Pantoja."

What a contrast to the <I>PDN</I>, which only says that “other information” was provided, rather than identifying exactly what the error was!

That’s about as unbecomingly coy as is the <I>Variety’s</I> refusal to name the places that do not pass the Bureau of Environmental Health’s health and sanitation inspections. Report of the inspections is published, presumably, as a public service. But what kind of public service is it if the public isn’t told which establishments have failed to pass the inspections?

One could, I suppose, praise the <I>Variety</I> for its tact and consideration in not naming names, but one would have to ask, whom does such tact and consideration serve? And to whom does the <I>Variety</I> owe its loyalty?

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If government is running out of ideas on how to save money, how to reduce expenditures - and it would seem that it has - how about setting up a program that would reward suggestions from individuals for saving money, cutting expenditures?

Guidelines could be set up to ensure that only reasonable and practical ideas would be eligible for reward. There probably should also be a requirement that only ideas that would result in saving of more than a fixed amount - say \$5,000? - would be considered. Rewards could be proportionate to the savings to be achieved. Of course, there’d have to be a credible panel of judges. It would be interesting to see what suggestions would be put forth.....