

On My Mind  
by Ruth L. Tighe

It may have been a misquote, or perhaps a mis-statement, taken out of context - in which case effort should be made to see that it is promptly corrected - but if it was indeed deliberate, the statement by the MVA Board Chairman that "it was not the responsibility of the tour operators to increase the business of the locals on island" was most disturbing.

<br><br>

If not local businesses, whose business is it the tour operators' responsibility to increase? As, theoretically, the CNMI's major industry, isn't that exactly what tourism is supposed to do - promote and support local businesses?

<br><br>

The MVA Chairman's comment came in response to House protests that the Japan Saipan Travel Association was ignoring locally-owned businesses in its listing of places for tourists to visit, according to a recent <I>Tribune</I> story.

<br><br>

Particularly now, with the economy floundering, it is perhaps high time that the practice of routing tourists only to those places that offer tour operators a commission, be re-examined. The practice discriminates against small to medium-size establishments with narrow profit margins. Having to pay a commission leaves them little money to re-invest in stock, to pay staff, to make their enterprise viable. Yet it is precisely these small to medium-size businesses that underpin the economy, that give jobs to and that provide income for local residents.

<br><br>

The practice also discourages tourist participation in local cultural events. Tour operators could take tourists to the CNMI Museum. They could take tourists to the exhibits mounted by the Commonwealth Council for Arts and Culture. They could bring tourists to the annual arts festival, to the numerous dance festivals or local artist performances. But those events don't pay commissions to tour operators, so tourists aren't brought there. Which short changes not only the tourists - who lose out on the opportunity to participate in and observe local culture, but also the practitioners of local culture.

<br><br>

Tourists could be brought to the local farmer's market, where they could, for example, be offered a taste of tuba, introduced to some of the more exotic fruits and vegetables available in the CNMI, see for themselves what the reef fish offered on local menus look like. This could give an appreciable boost to local farmers and fishermen. But they aren't.

<br><br>

Yes, tour operators have to make a living too. But it should not be at the expense of local businesses. Operators are already paid to tour the tourists. The real question is: who profits by the additional commission they are paid? Is it even considered income by the CNMI government? Do the operators pay tax on the commissions they receive?

<br><br>

The MVA is a government entity. Supposedly, its purpose is to encourage tourism as a means of supporting the economy. The basic component of the "economy" is the people who live here - the local residents. It seems only logical, therefore, that the MVA - and by extension, tour operators, SHOULD be responsible for increasing the business of locals on the island.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br>

Another government agency that would appear to be acting against the best interests of the people of the CNMI is the Division of Public Lands. In each of three notices of proposed land exchange which appeared in Friday's <I>Variety</I>, the public land being offered to land holders is considerably larger than the land being received in exchange by the government.

<br><br>

One exchange proposes to give away 17,000 square meters of public land in exchange for 2,917 square meters of private land. Even more disproportionate is another land exchange, which proposes to give away 1,571 square meters of public land for a mere 127 square meters of private land. In contrast, the third land exchange seems almost benign - it proposes to give away only 2,336 square meters of public land for a little less than half as much private land - 1,023 square meters.

<br><br>

With the CNMI's holdings of public land shrinking so rapidly, normal economics would set the price, or value, of public land at a premium. Instead, in these instances, it seems to be considered cheap and plentiful. Yet public land - indeed, all land - is a fixed commodity. Once it is used up, given away, there is no more.

<br><br>

The land exchanges are advertised as being for a public purpose. One can't help but wonder, though, how beneficial, and beneficial to whom, the purported public purpose really is in these particular land exchanges.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br>

Another seemingly false economy is the proposal by the DPS Commissioner to send some prisoners off-island to reduce overcrowding at the local facility. According to a story in the <I>Tribune</I>, the Commissioner declared that this would "cut down on the department's daily expenses in feeding and providing security to inmates."

<br><br>

It's hard to imagine that the cost of sending inmates all the way to the mainland, not to mention the costs of feeding and providing them security, would come to less than what it costs to feed them and provide them with security here in the CNMI. Unless security here is grossly overpaid? Or the food they're served here is, somehow, that much more expensive than the food they'd be served elsewhere?

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br>

On a slightly different note, it seems that, while the CNMI has attained notoriety in some state-side media, to too many other sectors, the CNMI remains an unknown quantity. In fact, it's even being labeled a foreign country.

<br><br>

It's bad enough having to explain to some clerk at the other end of an 800 number that of course it's possible to send packages to a post office box number, because the CNMI doesn't have street

names, and everyone gets his or her mail at a post office. Or to explain that even though the clerk's computer may not recognize MP as a two-letter state code, it really is, and that, in fact, it was so designated and assigned by the United States Post Office itself.

<br><br>

But to be told that the use of FC as the CNMI's two-letter state code is not a mistake, but that it is categorically used for all areas other than the 50 states, regardless of their affiliation, goes too far.

FC stands for "Foreign Country." Which is exactly what someone told me when I complained that the address shown on my just renewed credit card was not correct.

<br><br>

Argue as best I might, I could not convince the person at the other end of the line that the CNMI is not a foreign country, that it is a part of the U.S., that it really does have a valid state code of its own. Firmly and stubbornly, she insisted that her computer does not agree.

<br><br>

What's perhaps more bothersome is that this policy is of recent origin. The credit card company that now uses "FC" had not previously done so. Of course, previously it hadn't used any two-letter state code. Which may explain why it kept taking so long to get my statements, and why I kept getting dunned for late payments.....

<br><br>

But how does one combat this pervasive ignorance, this constant irritant, this major impediment to catalog shopping? The Post Office has done its share. It has assigned the CNMI its own two-letter state code. The credit card companies have done their share. They've at least agreed to issue cards to such an address. It would appear, then, that the campaigning has to be aimed at all those computerniks who write software for credit card companies. Do they belong to a common professional association? Do they have a union? Is there a web page, or a chat room that they all check into?

<br><br>

After all this time, it's getting pretty tiresome to continue having to explain, argue, protest every time my credit card gets renewed, every time I order something from a new vendor (or sometimes, even from one I've ordered from before). If someone's found a solution, I'd love to hear it.