

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

Sitting on the "inside" rather than the "outside" of our local network system, I don't have a very clear idea of what access to this column looked like last week. I know that from this side, I couldn't get access to my input page, so I was unable to inform those who did manage to access the site that for a number of reasons, there wasn't going to be a column. I guess, to look on the bright side of things, it's a good thing I had not managed to put a column together, because if I had, and then found myself unable to upload it, I would have really been frustrated!

Even so, I had hoped to repeat one part of the 9/24 column, because it had inadvertently gotten buried due to a missing paragraph mark, and it was one I thought important enough to want to make sure it received due attention. So I will repeat it here:

The testimony presented by government officials, the statements made by HANMI, the Chamber of Commerce, SGMA, constituted a fulsome, pointed and instructive summary and description of the current state of CNMI affairs. No doubt the presentations will all be preserved as parts of the official record of the hearings by the U.S. Congress. It would be useful, however, if those presentations were also collected and published locally as a single volume, for use both as a general reference source, and as a resource in countering similar situations in the future.

Will all that testimony be submitted to the CNMI Archives, at NMC? Will each of the agencies and the organizations preserve a copy of its testimony? Will it, perhaps, give copies to the media? Being a librarian at heart - a firm believer not only in the value of information, but also in the importance of convenient access to that information - it pains me to think that all that accumulated information may simply be filed away, or even tossed out, never to benefit another soul.

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The situation at the NMI Retirement Fund - with a governor-appointed board hiring an administrator whose credentials for the position have been publicly questioned - poses an interesting dilemma. If the board refuses to reconsider its action, to whom can those people who believe the board is wrong appeal? What recourse do they have? Where is the authority?

The newly-appointed administrator not only failed to submit all the required documents - in this case, proof of graduation from an accredited college - which the position announcement stated was itself grounds for disqualifying any candidate. But in addition, court records show that the new appointee had been charged and pleaded guilty to a number of banking violations. Moreover, by accepting the appointment, the appointee violated one of the conditions of his parole: that he not serve in a fiduciary capacity before the end of calendar year 1999.

The Retirement Fund, under its previous administrator, has built for itself an outstanding record as the most responsible, the most trustworthy, the most capable, and the most successful of all

NMI's government agencies. It has valiantly tried not to let politics affect its operation - despite repeated efforts of the legislature to do so. It has achieved an enviable rate of return on investment, administering and investing the funds entrusted to it for the provision of retirement and disability annuities to its members with great skill, sound judgment and absolute integrity.

It would be a catastrophe if what the Retirement Fund has achieved since its inception were now allowed to be destroyed through highly-suspect, obviously political, murky machinations. Not only present retirees, but all government employees - the retirees of the future - would eventually pay the price if the Retirement Fund lost its assets due to mismanagement resulting from opportunistic, fiducially irresponsible, political interests.

While the Governor may be technically correct in stating that it is out of his hands, it is, nonetheless deeply disturbing that he apparently plans to sit back and let events play out as they may, regardless of the outcome. It would have been far more reassuring if he had acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, if he had promised to monitor the situation, if he had said he'd do whatever was in his power to make sure the Retirement Fund was protected.

If that authority - to protect the assets of the Retirement Fund, to protect the retirement benefits of all government employees past, present and future - does not lie with the Governor, where does it lie? Maybe it will fall to the beneficiaries themselves to protect the Fund and their present and future benefits?

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Is there a cost-benefit analyst in the house? Two more Capital Hill houses - that used to be allotted mostly to off-island contract government employees - are being converted to government offices. On one site, workers have even paved over part of the lawn for use as parking space.

Now, it may be true that it saves money to put government agencies in there, since the government already owns the land and the building, and therefore doesn't have to pay anyone rent. But the question is whether more money couldn't be made by using that land differently. What if the houses up there were turned into "estates" and leased to the retired rich - be they from Japan, Korea, China, the U.S. or wherever?

Capitol Hill is prime real estate on Saipan and in the CNMI - all the infrastructure - power, water, roads - is in place, it has a beautiful view, it is cooler than the rest of the island, and at the moment, it is still quiet and uncrowded. Surely that, too, is worth a significant amount of money. Would the government make more money if it turned the Capitol Hill housing area into a residential enclave for the well-to-do?

Doing so would allow those open spaces to continue to exist, would allow the vast expanses of greenery, and the many trees on Capitol Hill, to continue to remain in place, would be ecologically least disruptive. Ideally, some of the area would be developed into a park, perhaps even with a swimming pool, so that residents of both Capitol Hill and the rest of the island could enjoy the view, the cool breezes, the freedom from noisy traffic.

There is talk of putting a high school on Capitol Hill. Not that I begrudge students cool weather and a nice view, but that would seem to be a very poor, economically speaking, use of such valuable land. There has also been talk of putting some sort of resort hotel complex up there. In the short term, commercialization of the area might appear to most promising in terms of revenue generation, but the destruction of the beauty, the ambience of Capitol Hill could kill the very things that give the area its high value. It would also close the area off altogether to island residents, depriving them of the opportunity to enjoy what Capitol Hill has to offer.

Before too many more of those TT houses are converted to government offices, shouldn't there be a cost-benefit analysis, a discussion of the best use of that land, some opportunity to exchange ideas before it's too late?

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The news that NASA's latest Mars probe failed because someone didn't catch the difference between metric and non-metric figures hasn't received a lot of attention. Yet it should have. Millions and millions of dollars went into the design, manufacture and launch of the satellite that was supposed to circle Mars, and take pictures of its back side. Because of the mathematical mix-up, the satellite never re-appeared from behind Mars.

I guess I'd try to hide a failure of such magnitude too. But there are lessons to be learned, that will not be learned if the loss isn't given more public notice. For one, the importance of detail, of accuracy, of quality control. It was, apparently, lacking there. As it also was, it seems, in the recent nuclear accident in Japan..

It should also call into question the wisdom of spending such enormous amounts of money on invasive outer-space jaunts, when the world we know and live on is in such dire need of help just to survive. We are destroying the atmosphere, we are contaminating the soil, we are consuming natural resources, we are poisoning the water - all of which are degrading the quality of life, and none of which will recuperate without massive outlays of funding.

Does it make any sense to try to send probes to Mars, when we so desperately need those monies to care for and nurture our own planet?