

Election Day is a mere two weeks away. Two proposed amendments to the CNMI Constitution will be on the ballot, yet voters have received very little information about either one. Why? Because neither the law nor the Constitution assigns the responsibility for educating the voters about such issues to any one or to any office, and as a result, no one takes any responsibility for doing so. In fact, with - to date - but three exceptions, there hasn't been any discussion of the amendments at all in the press. House Member Melvin O. Faisao has made a statement in opposition to one of the amendments, which was picked up by Tuesday's <I>Tribune</I>, the next day the <I>Tribune</I> carried an editorial calling for the withdrawal of other one, and today, a<I>Tribune</I> columnist has voiced his opposition to the same amendment.

Faisao voiced opposition to the Constitutional amendment proposed by Senate Legislative Initiative 11- 4, which would establish a separate department of finance in the legislative branch and another in the judicial branch, in addition to the one already in existence in the executive branch, giving the CNMI government three departments of finance. Faisao urged voters to reject this amendment, according to the story in the paper, because it would only add another layer of bureaucracy, and add to the expense of government. The initiative, which was prompted by Department of Finance refusals to process travel documents for members of the legislature who had not yet cleared previous travel accounts, would free legislators from having to meet existing expenditure regulations.

The <I>Tribune</I> editorial wants the constitutional amendment proposed by Senate Legislative Initiative 11-1 to be withdrawn. This Initiative would allow only people of Northern Mariana Island descent to vote on any changes to Article XII that affect its protection against the alienation of land. The editorial argues that limiting a vote to only those of Northern Marianas descent would inhibit economic development, could be unconstitutional, and, in any case, is premature, since according to the Covenant no change can be made to Article XII for another eleven years. The columnist believes the people of the CNMI no longer need the protection provided by Article XII and that the "insurance,"if you will, provided by Senate Legislative Initiative 11-1 is not necessary.

Significant as both of these proposed amendments are, there has been no other discussion, or information about them, published in either of the island's newspapers. As legislative initiatives, the proposed amendments, both of which originated in the Senate, needed only legislative approval to be placed on the ballot, without any vote by the people. As a result, neither received any publicity before being put on the ballot, and neither has received any public notice to speak of since then, either.

The authority to assign responsibility for educating voters on proposed amendments lies with the members of the CNMI Legislature. It is up to them to pass a law making that responsibility clear; most logically, it would be assigned to the Board of Elections, which, being neutral, would be best suited to provide impartial information. Unfortunately, up until now, the members of the Legislature have done nothing to help voters understand what they will be voting on.

But perhaps the Legislature has refused to do so because it is in its best interests NOT to clarify

the issues for the voters? Because it is easier to simply tell voters to vote "yes" or "no" - as the case may be - without explaining what is at stake?

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Rota and Tinian will each have, in addition, a proposed local law on the ballot. Tinian's local law proposes a number of changes to its Casino Gaming Control Act, perhaps the most significant of which is the reduction in the non-refundable application fee from \$200,000 to \$50,000. Another \$150,000 is required as part of the application, but it, apparently, would be refundable if the casino did not develop. Fees for annual business licenses, and renewal thereof, would also be lowered.

Rota's proposed local law calls for the establishment, regulation and control of casino gambling on the island of Rota.

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Politics, it has been said, is the game of choice here in the Marianas, but there are times when it goes too far. One such time was last night in Tanapag at a presentation given by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the CNMI's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Department of Public Health (DPH), among others, on PCB contamination in Tanapag.

Five presentations were scheduled, along with the inevitable opening remarks, closing remarks, and summary. In between, the program planners had - somewhat reluctantly - agreed to schedule brief question sessions, to give the attendees an opportunity to do more than just sit there for the nearly three hours of presentation.

Unfortunately, a number of the politicians in attendance could not resist the opportunity to take microphone in hand, and spout forth rhetorical questions, emotional diatribes and other time-consuming harangues, none of which added one iota of understanding to the topic under discussion.

Only Juan N. Babauta, who is not running for office this year, raised a meaningful issue germane to the subject: he had found a list of positive, useful, recommendations for further treatment of the PCB problem in a draft report which had, however, been cut from the final version, and he wanted to know why. Who squelched them? Why weren't they acted upon? An ACE official in attendance eventually agreed, as a result of Babauta's questioning, to try get the committee which reviewed the final report, to re-insert the recommendations.

It's unfortunate that when federal officials make the effort to come to the CNMI to meet with and talk to members of the community, such dialogue is thwarted by politicians intent only on campaigning for their own election. Those politicians could have served as model elder statesmen. They could have enhanced and validated the meeting by showing respect for the presenters; by asking valid, legitimate questions, by facilitating the asking of questions by the other attendees.

But they did not, and everyone there came out a loser instead.

One moral of that story: don't do such presentations so close to election day!

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Much money changes hands during election campaigns. Sad to say, many people feel accepting such money obligates them "to follow the money" when it comes to casting their vote. Much pressure is also exerted along family lines, and many people continue to feel that family ties obligate them to "follow family" when it comes to casting their vote. The obligations appear to be so strong that they overrule common sense, they outweigh logic, they override any concept of fairness, decency, integrity.

Would that the voters felt safe enough in the privacy of the voting booth to vote their conscience, regardless of who has given them money, what family member is running for office!

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The "url" omitted from last week's column is: <http://net.saipan.com/personal/omm>.

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p.s. to JR: There were two parties to the action, so to speak: the donor and the recipient. I chose to go to the recipient because I felt - in that case at least - the church to be far more credible than any politician.