

On My Mind  
3/17/00

The good news is that KRNM has finally gotten its transmitter back on the air. Hurray, Hurray! What a pleasure to get consistently good reception again! Mozart, interrupted - and static-y - was not fun.

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It's also good news that steps are finally being taken to protect the quality of Saipan's lagoon as well as the near shore waters of Tinian and Rota. The CRMO has temporarily halted issuing new commercial water sport permits until meaningful impact assessments are performed and a viable resource conservation management plan is in place.

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The lagoon - and its sandy beaches - are one of Saipan's biggest tourist attractions. The decision to take action on assuring its continued appeal comes none too soon. There has been serious degradation of the quality of the lagoon water, and of the quality and quantity of the marine life it shelters. The real question is: how long will it take to restore it to its former healthier condition? Another, perhaps more fundamental question: If remedies are defined for doing so, will people accept and observe them?

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The bad news is that so many proposals, or different versions of the same proposals, are being introduced in the Legislature of late that it's difficult to keep track of them all, to differentiate between them. (Admittedly, that's not really "bad" news, but for the sake of parallelism....) Particularly worrisome is the so-called Omnibus Labor and Business Reform Act. As its name implies, the bill packages together a hodgepodge of provisions affecting the garment industry as well as business and investment interests.

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The provisions, though, keep changing as lobbying from one group or another results in modifications here, additions there and deletions elsewhere, making it difficult to know exactly what the bill does contain at any given moment. What is needed is a score-card, showing each provision and its latest status.

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For example, a new provision was added just this week, but received no special fanfare. According to the account in the <I>Tribune</I>, the new provision would repeal an existing law that denies certificates of exemption from import quotas to on-island manufacturers who violate local or federal labor laws. Though on its face the repeal is of questionable merit, neither explanation nor justification for the new provision was supplied.

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Yet there is valid rationale for the repeal. The law this provision would repeal also denies certification of origin to garment factories that violate the Saipan Garment Manufacturers Association (SGMA) code of conduct. The law, however, cannot be used to enforce private sector rules, making this part of the law invalid, unenforceable. There may be other ways to cure the

problem, but that, of course, is a different issue.

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The point is that we, the public, rely on the press to keep us informed. An informed public is particularly important in the present situation, where major changes to existing law are being bundled into a single package through a complex piece of legislation that keeps changing its content, and where, if the public is not vigilant, it would be all too easy to slip through some less desirable provisions as well.

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Please, may we have a little more help, a score card, perhaps?

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Another area where the press could be more helpful is in explaining what criteria, if any, are being used by the Legislature in holding its sessions on Rota and Tinian. Has a regular rotating schedule been set up? Is there some, any, rationale for when the legislature meets on which island?

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Did the press know that one of the legislature's Rota sessions was scheduled to coincide with a Rota fiesta? If so, how come that wasn't reported?

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Good government depends on an informed electorate. It is the function of the press to provide that information. But is that what is happening here?

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Some short takes:

1) Regarding the recently introduced legislative proposal that SCUBA divers be charged a "licensing" fee, which was - as is typical - strongly opposed by the Marianas Visitors Authority: A fee for diving is not inappropriate - after all, the divers disturb the natural environment, both on shore and in the water. A fee for doing so, which should then be used to preserve and protect the environment, seems only fair, and in keeping with an "eco-tourism" philosophy.

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As far as the time and effort needed to collect the fee, a simple approach would be to charge each diver \$1.00 each time the diver rented a tank full of air. No permits, no fee processing, no waits.

It would place a burden on those who provide air, but at least it wouldn't inconvenience those darling tourists that MVA is so concerned about protecting at the expense of our environment.

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2) Regarding the litany of poker-room thefts that seem to be filling the pages of the paper, the courts, the jails, and sometimes the hospital and the morgue: Does it not strike anyone that in addition to impoverishing those who play the machines, the poker machines have a pronounced effect on the crime rate in the CNMI?

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3) Regarding the \$1 million settlement award given to 400 Chinese garment workers formerly employed at the Marianas Garment Manufacturing Inc., Doesn't it seem odd, if not downright unfair, that two years after receiving the award, the CNMI Department of Labor, which filed the

suit against the garment factory, has yet to pay out a single penny to the deprived workers?

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4) Regarding the public land inventory being undertaken by the Division of Public Lands: Particularly with public lands in such short supply, Wouldn't it make sense to look into possible abuses of the homestead program at the same time? Rumor has had it for years that not all homestead applicants met the criteria for being given homestead lots, and that not all applicants have followed the rules for their retention of those lots. Shouldn't those homestead lots be reclaimed by DPL?

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Homes not built due to a lack of infrastructure should be exempted, but not homes rented or leased out to others before the ten-year time limit has run, or claims to landlessness based on subterfuge.

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5) Regarding the bill supporting licensure of foreign doctors so that tourists may be better accommodated: First of all, isn't it rather short-sighted - and biased - to expect that only Japanese tourists will be rich enough, come in a great enough number, to warrant their own doctors? If the law must use specific nationalities, why not include doctors for Korean and Chinese and perhaps even Filipino tourists?

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Secondly, if doctors of other nationalities are going to be allowed to practice in the CNMI, will the legislature also amend the law banning the importation of foreign medications, and exempt the medicines those doctors are apt to prescribe for their patients?

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Speaking of things medical, here's a tip for people who are having problems paying for their medications. It seems that it's cheaper to buy a big pill containing, say, 10 mg, and cut it in half - if the prescription calls for a dose of 5 mg - than it is to buy the pills in the 5 mg size. So a publication called <I>Consumer Reports on Health</I> recommends that people ask their doctors to prescribe their medicine in double doses, and that people then go home and split the pills in half and take only half a pill at a time.

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"Since many drugs are priced about the same regardless of their strength," says the magazine, "such splitting of double-dose pills can result in up to a 50 percent saving."

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Of course, the pill has to be splittable, and capsules and liquids don't qualify for that approach. The magazine suggests buying a pill splitter (cost, about \$5, says the mag) as being safer than trying to cut the pill with a knife. But where insurance doesn't cover prescriptions, it's certainly worth considering.