

On My Mind

9/8/00

Another rainy day. Pity the poor tourist! The heavy rains - such as have poured down on Saipan for the last several days - are more bane than boon for almost everyone, flooding roads and homes, eroding road shoulders and shorelines, closing schools and government offices, bringing power outages, slowing sales, downing banana trees and flame tree branches.....

But while most take comfort in the fact that at least the rain replenishes the groundwater supply, for tourists who spend precious vacation time here, that's no consolation. Rain only brings frustration and unhappiness, because when warm sun, calm seas and blue skies are not available to them, there's not much left to keep them occupied. Of course, there's shopping, but most tourists come on a budget, and there's only so much they can afford to spend.

For a place that's so dependent on tourism and tourist satisfaction and is so predictably prone to heavy rains, the lack of alternative tourist attractions is not only puzzling, but also economically self-defeating. Tourists on Saipan during tropical storm/typhoon Saomai, who found themselves with nothing to do, are not going to recommend the place to their friends. Given that word-of-mouth is such a strong factor in successful advertising, their non-recommendations will result in a significant loss of future tourist visits.

Rather than bringing in another golf course, or, God help us, pistol and rifle ranges as additional tourist attractions - and neither of those are rainy-day activities in any case - what the visitors' bureau, the legislature, the Chamber of Commerce, the development authority, should be doing is looking for projects that can keep tourists happy even when the CNMI's fabled warm sun, calm seas and blue skies aren't available.

One such project, long on the drawing boards but never acted upon, is creation of a cultural/performing arts center. The proposed center is envisioned as housing an on-going display of local art and artifacts, a stage for the presentation of local music, dance and related performances, and theater space for the continuous showings of films and video-tapes on the islands' history and culture.

A cultural/performing arts center would add a significant component - that has, so far, been missing - to the packages offered tourists: a look at, and exposure to, the culture of the local indigenous population - in this case, the Chamorros and Carolinians who first inhabited the Northern Marianas island chain. It is, after all, the CNMI's local culture - and unique history - that distinguishes the CNMI from any other tropical island destination.

The center would provide dedicated space for permanent display of the works of local artists, without the need to dismantle them to provide room for other functions and displays, as now occurs with the Art Council space on Capitol Hill. The theater could show footage of local events, such as Arts Festival performances and Liberation Day parades as well as films produced by local students, in addition to existing productions.

To help support the cost of maintenance of the center, the original plan called for an admission fee to the movie and video showings.

As well as providing an additional activity for tourists - on either rainy or sunny days - the center would provide meaningful employment opportunities to the local population as guides and interpreters of the exhibitions, as performers of music and dance, as creators of the arts and crafts.

Economist Bill Stewart, in a recent article, stated that what was needed to bolster the CNMI economy and replace the garment factories was a project that combined a "beautiful environment with compatible job-creating, tax-paying, diversified development." A cultural center for the arts would certainly fit that description.

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Another project that would offer tourists an alternative rainy day activity is construction of a roller-skating, or roller blading, or ice-skating rink - though the need to maintain ice on the floor might make the last too costly. Skating can be done singly, as a couple, or as a group; it requires no special training and only a minimum amount of skill; and it's good exercise. A rink would also be fairly simple to operate. If special events were held, such as dance contests or sprint races, the rink would attract even those who'd rather watch than do. With a restaurant or coffee shop from which people could watch the skaters, such a project would draw even more customers.

A skating rink has other advantages: it would provide a relatively inexpensive, enjoyable, and healthful activity for local residents - from school child to teen-ager to man 'amko - which, in turn, would mean that the rink would not be totally dependent on tourist traffic for its income.

With the endless days of rain still fresh in memory - and the certain knowledge of more to come - isn't it about time to pay some serious attention to the need for alternative tourist activities?

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Two other activities already in existence but for some unfathomable reason totally ignored by the visitors' bureau and everyone else involved in tourist promotion: the CNMI museum and the Joeten-Kiyu Public Library. Of course, as public institutions, they are unable to offer rake-offs to tour guides.....

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While on the subject of meeting tourist needs, surely the idea of putting a garment factory on the the Beach Road site now occupied by Basic Construction won't be taken seriously? Basic Construction Supply is closing down, and a recent story in the <I>Variety</I> has it that the site "may be taken over by a garment manufacturing company."

Beach Road was once designated a scenic drive. Either that designation has been changed, or whoever is responsible for enforcing it isn't doing his or her job. More and more commercial establishments have appeared over the years, and while some have at least had the civic-mindedness to observe set-backs defined by the non-existent zoning code and to landscape their road frontage, quite a number have not.

Just as is Capitol Hill land, so must beach front land be considered prime real estate. In the case of land fronting Beach Road, however, there is even more at stake, since Beach Road has traditionally been a major tourist attraction with its panoramic view of the lagoon, and, in season, its arbor of blossoming flame trees. Were there a zoning code in effect, appropriate use of the Basic Construction site would be assured. But without it, there is serious cause for alarm.

Garment factories on island are enclosed by metal fencing. Entry is through large - and guarded - fenced gates. Most have unsightly and unpaved parking spaces in the front. Space is needed for containers, for heavy equipment. Garment factory barracks are adorned with worker laundry.

None of it is appropriate to the preservation of Beach Road as a tourist vista, as a scenic drive, or to the preservation of the recently completed pathway as a safe and pleasant means of exercise.

Nor would it seem to make a lot of sense, in any case, to construct yet another garment factory - or its barracks - when all of them, allegedly, are slated to close down a mere five years from now.

What should the site be used for? Here's a truly radical idea: re-route the road, and turn it into a park. Or put the cultural/performing arts center there (making sure to put the parking lot in the back...). Or a restaurant built to provide maximum view of the lagoon (isn't it strange how few restaurants there are that have decent lagoon views?). If the site must be commercially developed, follow the pattern of the Cabrera Center, with the store fronts (and parking) along a line perpendicular to Beach Road, and not parallel to it, thereby minimizing the visual impact of the site on passers-by.

More tourists are drawn by beauty than by ugliness.