

On My Mind
10/6/00

There seems to be increased interest, of late, in opening the Northern Islands to settlement and development, but just what is driving that interest is not clear. It may be due to a benign wish to give Northern Islanders a homestead of their own. It could be due to the wishful thought that development of the Northern Islands would help the CNMI's sluggish economy. Or, as is true with the ill-conceived notion of "shooting galleries" for the CNMI, it could be driven by a developer with more dollars than sense.

One of the possibilities for the Northern Islands, mentioned in the <I>Variety</I> just this past week, was the establishment of garment factories. The mention appeared in an account of a survey to be taken of Northern Island residents regarding their needs, their preferences for development. The garment factories, along with golf courses, gaming and gambling activities, nature-based tourism, commercial banking, hotels, restaurants, and a host of other options were listed among the choices to be offered Northern Islanders in the survey.

Establishing homesteads - with water catchment systems, solar power systems, coral roads and two-room school houses is one thing. But garment factories require quite a different level of commitment. And, without millions of dollars of investment - and radical change to the topography of the Northern Islands - would seem more wish than reality. There is, for example, no harbor large enough to accommodate the shipping vessels for bringing in raw materials, for sending off finished products. There are no roads to transport those materials between harbor and factory and back again. Without an adequate harbor, it would be difficult and enormously expensive to build the factories to begin with, much less the required barracks and company housing, to bring in the generators to provide power and operate the factories, to bring in the machinery and supplies to provide a water system, or to build roads.

Of course, the same restraints also apply, in various degrees, to all the other development proposals. On other than the smallest scale, construction costs for any one of the proposed activities would appear to far exceed potential profits. Their contribution to the economy of the CNMI would be more apt to be negative than positive. It is difficult to imagine that a legitimate businessman would even begin to consider such a prospect.

Oddly enough, more appropriate projects, such as giant clam, sponge or seaweed farming, pearl oyster cultivation, trochus harvesting, marine aquarium fish breeding and the like, are not even mentioned in the list of choices offered by the survey.

Daydreaming and wishful thinking are all very well as occasional pastimes. But reality they are not.

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Totally missing from all the rhetoric about developing the Northern Islands is any talk of protecting and preserving what natural environment still remains, any talk of adapting development to

the contour of the various islands, any talk of optimizing land use - any talk, in short, of zoning. No thought is being given, apparently, to preventing development in the Northern Islands from being as haphazard, as invasive, and as destructive, as it has been on Saipan.

Are the Northern Islanders willing to see hotels built along the shorefront, depriving them of access to the beaches? and blocking their views? Are Northern Islanders willing to see garment factories - should there ever be any - next to their homes, in the middle of their residential areas? Are Northern Islanders willing to accept the wanton destruction of vegetation to accommodate commercial (or residential) development? The destruction of wetlands and other native habitat? No limits on how close to a road, or to each other, commercial establishments are built? Power poles are put up? Water pipes are laid? Telephone wires are strung?

There is no need for the elaborate, overly-complicated approach to land use management that the zoning plan for Saipan incorporated. Perhaps it should not even be referred to as a zoning plan. But if no effort is made to develop a land use management plan for the Northern Islands - one that protects the natural resources that are still there, that takes into account the impact of development on not only the natural resources but also the quality of life, that considers the Northern Islands within the context of the CNMI as a whole - it can only spell disaster not only for the people of the Northern Islands, but for all the rest of us as well.

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Another area where a reality check is sorely needed is in regard to the proposal to establish "shooting galleries" in the CNMI. The Rota mayor has kindly offered to allow "his" island to be used for such a development, should Tinian and Saipan reject the idea.

It is difficult to reconcile the memory of Benjamin T. Manglona, long-time CNMI Senator, respected Lieutenant Governor, instrumental party to the creation of the CNMI Covenant, articulate member of the first and second Constitutional Convention, with the mayor of Rota who is now advocating the importation of lethal handguns into that very same CNMI. What can he be thinking of? What can have changed him so?

To make matters worse, Senator Pete P. Reyes, who just returned from observing a "shooting gallery" in Korea, has declared that they are safe. He claims that the Korean facility was "safe" because it was in a controlled environment, with lots of security and many controls. His trip left him convinced that it would be "workable" to allow shooting galleries here.

One need only look at the many reports of theft, robbery, bribery and corruption to realize that controls or not, security or not, training and monitoring or not, absolute control is impossible. Human nature being what it is, such crimes will continue. It is only wishful thinking to believe that the handling of guns, once legalized, will not also be subject to such crimes, to believe that allowing handguns into the CNMI will not increase the use of guns in illegal, if not lethal, actions.

Do such wishful thinkers really have the best interests of the people of the CNMI at heart? I don't think so.

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The brouhaha about the CNMI not being a safe place for tourists forces the realization that a concern for tourist safety - or satisfaction, or enjoyment - is not a high priority to very many people in the CNMI. The prevailing attitude would appear to be that tourists are here for only a short period of time, that they are all strangers, and that what happens to them is not of much concern. There may also be a certain resentment that tourists get discounts and services that are not available to local residents.

Thus, when tourists are mugged, it calls forth little sympathy among most local residents - except in the most general of terms. After all, it has nothing to do with them. Most local residents are not directly dependent on tourists for their livelihood, do not feel they have a stake in whether or not tourists are well treated while in the CNMI. Nor are many local residents - except the employees of the Department of Public Safety, and perhaps the Marianas Visitors Authority - directly involved in meeting tourist needs.

Without a voice, without a role to play, without a stake in the issue, many, if not most, local residents are mere by-standers when it comes to the 'care and feeding' of tourists. It might behoove the MVA to spend a few of its dollars educating your everyday resident - as opposed to hotel owners and restaurant operators - about the importance of tourism to his and her well-being. It might behoove the MVA to spend a few of its dollars encouraging local residents to participate more actively in conducting and promoting tourist services, ensuring that your everyday resident be given a voice in the planning for and implementation of tourist activities.

If more local residents felt they had a more direct stake in the welfare of tourists, if more local residents felt they had some "ownership" of tourism activities, if more islanders had more opportunity for personal, direct contact with tourists, no doubt they would feel a far greater concern about tourism safety. And that in turn, would increase the pressure that tourist safety concerns be high priority on everyone's list.

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Would it be a semantic splitting of hairs to argue that the CNMI is not violating the intent of the Covenant provision allowing the CNMI to control its own immigration because what's at issue isn't really immigration?

If one were to define immigration as the act of entering <I>and settling</I> in a land to which one is not native, then the CNMI's importation of foreign workers does not constitute immigration, since there is no intent to have those workers <I>settle</I> in the CNMI.

The intent of the Covenant agreement giving the CNMI the control over immigration was to protect the CNMI from being overrun and overruled by outsiders. The CNMI has done this - it

may be “overrun“ but it is not overruled - because there is no provision for foreign workers to settle here, or to take part in the governance of the CNMI. Thus, the intent of that provision of the Covenant remains intact, doesn't it?