

On My Mind
12/24/04

Merry Christmas! Felis Pasgua! Ammeseighil Ubwutiwel Layu`l Luugh! Maligyang Pasko! Joyeux Noel! Froeliches Weinachten!

Well, it's Christmas Day, but one sure wouldn't know it driving down Beach Road. There's not a single holiday decoration between Susupe and Garapan! Coming back to Saipan after two days on Rota, where decorations were numerous, lovely and some quite ingenious - I loved the painted pandanus, and the painted red flowers whose name I can't remember that had been hung on various plumeria trees along the roads - it was quite a comedown, to drive along Beach Road out to Tanapag and find nothing - until one reached Garapan.

Apparently all of the light sculptures which sat on Beach Road last year, and which are not only unique, but also quite lovely, have been co-opted by commercial tourist interests, leaving none for the rest of us. Best as I have been able to determine, the fault apparently lies with the Marianas Visitors Authority, who, I was told, hadn't had time to organize the repair, funding, and installation of the sculptures, and turned them over to the Japanese and Saipan travel associations, who, in turn, "donated" them to Chamolinian Village.

Looks like the MVA deserves this year's award for the grinch that stole Christmas.....

I found fascinating the list put together by Tribune columnist Jaime Vergara in this past Monday's issue of the wide range of religious celebrations that occur among the multicultural peoples of the U.S. between November and January. "One finds," he wrote, "Muslim Eid-ul-Fitr, the end of Ramadhan; the Baha'i Ascension of Abdu'l-Baha, and the Nineteenth Day; the Jewish Chanukah and the Tu B'Shevat; the Hindu-Sikh Lohri (Winter Festival); the Japanese Ganjitsu (spoil the kids for a day); the Christian Christmas; the secular Boxing Day invented by the Brits; Kwanzaa of African Americans, and the various New Year celebrations."

Vergara points out that December 25 marks more than the birth of Jesus. It is also the birthday of the Greek god Adonis, the Egyptian hero-king Osiris, and the gods of wine, Moran Bacchus and Greek Dionysius. He notes that it is also the time of the winter solstice.

It is, in short, a time for all of us to share the spirit of peace and brotherhood.

Which makes all the more distressing the nationwide poll described in last Sunday's issue of the Tribune that "nearly half of all Americans believe that the U.S. government should restrict the civil liberties of Muslim Americans." Almost more upsetting is the finding of the poll, conducted by Cornell University students this past fall, that those who described themselves as highly religious, and who paid more attention to television news, were more in favor of curtailing Muslim rights than people who did not describe themselves as highly religious, and who did not pay attention to television news. 715 people were questioned in the poll.

Religion supposedly preaches tolerance and brotherhood. Access to television news supposedly is educational and broadening, yet in this survey, those two forces appear to have done just the opposite. A good time to remember that statistics can be used and interpreted to say anything the poll taker wishes them to.

While on the subject of statistics, could someone please tell me on what basis the Commonwealth Utilities Commission believes separating the water and sewer divisions from the power division is a good idea? Has anyone collected any hard data on the costs and benefits of separation?

A separate agency for water and sewer services would necessitate the formation of another board of governance. Establishment of another bureaucracy to administer the work of the agency. Purchase of a separate fleet of vehicles. Separate offices, no doubt. All of which will cost enormous sums of money which the CNMI can ill afford at the moment.

If the concern is that one division is subsidizing the other, who is to say that that is always bad? At the moment, far fewer people are hooked into the sewer system than either the power or water system. Should the users of the sewer system be expected to pay for the whole thing themselves, when the customer base is so much smaller? Or is it more important to expand the sewer system so that fewer people will be forced to use septic systems and potentially harm the ground water? If the sewer system is separate from the power system, who will pay for the expansion?

The function and operation of all three divisions interrelate. If the services were separated, the demand for power could create more conflict between the agencies than if they were all under the same umbrella.

There's been no information about the grounds on which the idea is based. If no data exists, seems it would be more prudent to gather some information first before embarking on such an expensive proposal.

The proposal to install a decompression chamber on Rota AND Tinian AND Saipan is equally weak on supporting data. One can understand the desire on the part of Rota and Tinian not to be left out of projects proposed for Saipan, but there comes a time when simple logic, simple arithmetic must prevail. It simply would not be cost-effective to install such expensive equipment on all three islands. It is probably barely justifiable on Saipan....

The idea of charging divers \$1 per dive - be it for funding a dive chamber or maintaining our shorelines - is long overdue. The divers would benefit from either one, and it is eminently logical to expect them to pay part of the cost.

Not that it would necessarily generate enough monies to afford a separate dive chamber on each island, but greater enforcement of laws already on the books would certainly improve the state of

the economy as well, judging from all reports. In this past week alone, it has been reported that the CNMI has lost \$7 million by not sufficiently monitoring the transfer of poker machines, and lost untold additional revenues by its failure to assist the garment industry in halting the theft and illegal re-sale of garments produced by the island's garment factories. It does no good to keep on passing laws to provide this or that service when the laws already passed that would help provide the revenue to pay for those services are not enforced, and when no support for that enforcement is provided. Isn't it an elementary law of economics that one must first obtain the funds before spending them?

Another failure to monitor funding occurred in the House recently, when House leaders decided to end their investigation into the legality of the funding used for the purchase of the La Fiasco mall in San Roque in favor of investigation by the Office of the Public Auditor. According to the Public Auditor, this decision was made without consultation with the Public Auditor. Said the Public Auditor, "We've received a number of requests to investigate various La Fiesta issues: possible conflicts of interest related to the acquisition of leasehold and/or fee simple interest, feasibility study supporting the acquisition, marketing plan to support the gateway project, funding source, asset valuation, operations budget, accreditation concerns, etc. We're giving priority to the land acquisition issue for now, and should have a report out by the end of the month. The other issues will need to wait as we're quite busy wrapping up a number of other audits."

In other words, what the House was investigating now won't get investigated for quite a while. The question is, why did the House call off its investigation????

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Another question: where in the world did the House get the idea that more garment workers were needed on island? With the garment industry shrinking on an almost daily basis, surely there are enough workers already here to meet demand? Even the Saipan Garment Manufacturers Association Executive Director sees no need for additional workers. "We must state that we are concerned with the impression that our industry could use an additional 7,600 employees....it's just not true...." he informed House Floor Leader Oscar M. Babauta, who has just introduced a bill calling for the increase. We "cannot agree with increasing the overall cap by approximately 7,600 employees." concludes SGMA's letter.

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House action was a little more intelligent when it decided to defer action on two legislative initiatives introduced in the Senate that would have extended the lease periods on both public and private lands. For those who may have forgotten, the CNMI economy did very well under the present limits in the mid-'80's to early '90's. At the time, investors and entrepreneurs were quite willing to abide by the existing lease terms. And many of their investments remain successful. The need to extend lease terms has been proven not to be the stumbling block.

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Lest I too be considered a grinch, let me end by wishing everyone joy - and peace - this holiday season.