

On My Mind

2/25/00

Other than the impact it's bound to have on the members of the U.S. Congress - which is of no small concern - the CNMI legislature's campaign to repeal all the "reform" legislation passed by the previous legislature has, in my opinion, only one major flaw. Easing the requirement for a huge security deposit is long overdue. Canceling the "equal privilege" law, that provided local residents the same benefits as those given to foreign workers never seemed very workable to begin with.

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Even removing the cap on the number of foreign workers brought to the CNMI would appear to make sense - given the number of exemptions that have already been made in response to apparent need. It's somewhat puzzling, though, that in these times of a slowed-down economy, the CNMI still needs additional workers. What are they all doing? How can we afford to pay them all?

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The flaw lies in the proposal to also lift the ceiling on the number of garment factories allowed in the CNMI. Garment factories, and their accompanying need for barracks, consume a lot of land - not to mention water, power and sewer capacity. But it is the land issue that is of most concern, particularly since the CNMI has not yet implemented a zoning code. This means that the factories - and the barracks - can go up wherever their owners find landholders willing to lease their land for use as factories and barracks, regardless of how close that land may be to a school, a church, a residential area, a wildlife habitat, wetlands, or even a watershed..

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The supply of land, however, is not only finite, but is shrinking rapidly, as homestead development and other commercial ventures keep expanding. With no zoning in place, and dollars generally considered more valuable than rational land use, the uncontrolled construction of additional garment factories and barracks poses a significant threat to quality of life, to conservation of natural resources, to preservation of native habitat and species, and to protection of watersheds, wetlands and green space.

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There is irony, too, in advocating that more barracks and factories be built on the land when it seems clear that in five to seven years the factories will cease to be profitable and will close down. Since it could easily take a year or more to get all the paperwork accomplished and the buildings built, that shortens the time span that much more. It hardly seems profitable to have to build a factory, and import all the necessary machinery, only to have to tear it all down five years later. Where will all the debris - and all that equipment - go? Will it land up in our dump?

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What's needed to derail the campaign to impose federal immigration controls on the CNMI is not so much high-paid lobbyists, as a horde of readers, writers and clerks. Readers to pick up the many articles that are already out there on existing sweat shops in the U.S., such as the one that appeared in both the <I>Tribune</I> and the <I>Variety</I> this past week on sweat shops in Chicago. Clerks to cut out, copy, and fax copies of each such article to every member of

Congress, and to the President, and to the Department of Interior. And writers to report on all the other violations of fair labor laws, on all the other mistreatments of imported workers, that are taking place throughout the United States.

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For even if the CNMI's treatment foreign workers had not improved substantially - and evidence would have it that it has - it simply is not fair to single out the CNMI as the only place where such labor abuses exist. They exist, to a far greater extent and involving far larger numbers of workers, throughout the U.S. To penalize the CNMI, whose economy is so totally dependent on foreign workers, for alleged worker abuse - while allowing mainland sites, where the economic base is far more diverse, to continue workers abuse without penalty - is plainly discriminatory.

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The re-hiring of Preston, Gates, et al is not going to solve the problem. After all, it was Preston, Gates et al's treatment of the issue that caused the situation in the CNMI to become a political football to begin with. Prior to the firm's involvement, the CNMI's labor, economic, immigration problems were treated as apolitical issues at bi-partisan Congressional committee meetings, not as headline grabbing issues on the floor of the House or Senate.

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Whether any lobbying group or public relations firm can repair that damage is, of course, the real question.

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Guy Gabaldon called me this past week in response to the comments I'd made about him in a recent column. He'd heard about it, but hadn't been able to pull it off the web yet. Guy now lives in Modesto, California, but told me he really misses Saipan. He intends to come back at least long enough to try find someone to take over his youth project on Aguigan. Guy's WWII exploits are the subject of a web page at [www.usmcguy.cjb.net](http://www.usmcguy.cjb.net) - definitely worth looking at. The site also includes an interview with Guy.

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Has anyone else noticed the odd style now sported by <I>Tribune</I>? No longer is Pedro P. Tenorio identified as "Governor Tenorio." It's "Mister Tenorio" - making it rather difficult to keep track of who's who in articles that include any other Tenorio, such as Juan S., Board Chairman of CDA as well.

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And while it is customary to refer to people by their last name once an article identifies them in full, the <I>Tribune</I> has gotten formal, and now identifies them as "Mr." throughout the article.

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It's unclear whether this new style is meant to show respect - though surely referring to the Governor as "Mr." instead of "Governor" would not seem to bear that out - or has some other purpose.

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Driving north on Beach Road - particularly from Quartermaster Road on - sure is a mess! While the site of the deconstruction work - I'm told it is a sewer project - is gradually working northward, the reconstruction of the road left behind isn't all that satisfactory. Road shoulders aren't finished or marked, the jags where unpaved spots cut into paved road are left unpaved, and clear lane markers - because the road is now two shades of grey, making it difficult, particularly at night, to distinguish the lane - haven't been installed.

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Even the beach path is under deconstruction. I've yet to find out why. One Public Works employee thought it was for the installation of lighting. A Friend of the pathway said lighting conduits were already in place. But it's par for the course, isn't it? Digging things up again right after they've finally been finished?

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I can remember a time when Beach Road was full of pot holes - making a drive along the road quite pleasant. Having to go slow, there was time to admire the magnificent view of the lagoon.

Without the tinted windows, it was possible - and there was time - to recognize and wave to drivers going in the opposite direction. Today's Beach Road doesn't allow that - when it's in good repair, everyone drives too fast, and the tinted windows don't let you see who's in the car. Now that it is being worked on, you have to keep your eyes on the road to avoid all the pitfalls.