

On My Mind

3/30/01

Well, well, well. So the CNMI Attorney General's office has already spent some \$250,000, and is on its way to spend even more that was neither authorized nor budgeted, and now it's blaming the Legislature for its shortfall? Seems the AG's office hired a couple of unknown consulting firms from South Carolina - apparently without competitive bidding - to prepare those onerous "emergency" regulations on hazardous waste that were issued earlier this month, and, according to a story in the <I>Variety</I>, is now criticizing the Legislature for not reimbursing the AG's office for its expenditure.

The same two consulting firms - one environmental and the other legal - were responsible for the "Environmental Report of the Tanapag Village PCB Site" prepared for the AG's office and released in November of 2000. That report, in claiming that both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have endangered the health, safety and welfare of the people of Tanapag, apparently served as the basis for awarding to the same two firms the task of formulating emergency regulations to address their own conclusions.

The "emergency" regs, drawn in part from federal regulations, but also, in part, based solely on the imagination of the off-island consultants, impose after-the-fact analysis, evaluation, report and plan preparation requirements on the two federal agencies in regard to the now nearly completed work of removing PCB-contaminated soil from Tanapag village.

This week the two firms are back on island, allegedly to assess the extent to which the EPA and the ACE have met the requirements of the "emergency" regulations. Since there really wasn't an emergency to begin with, since the consultant report is flawed in more ways than one, and since the "emergency" regs are, in large part, both onerous and unenforceable, as well as being <I>ex post facto</I> in nature, it's not at all clear that the AG's office got its money's worth in contracting its two consultants. Which will, hopefully, give serious pause to the Legislature in deciding whether or not to bail out the office.

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I'm all in favor of women running for office. I believe most women aren't as distracted by a need to appear "macho" as so many men are, so they're apt to be more focused on issues than on being popular, getting rich, gaining power, as men tend to be. There is, moreover, a universal need for women as role models in capacities other than sex object - among girls as well as boys, adult women as well as men.

It is disappointing, then, to learn that a woman who one would think would make a great role model - educated, articulate, knowledgeable - has decided to run for office on a ticket that is, to put it politely, considerably flawed. Rita Inos - currently Commissioner of Education - may be frustrated by how long it takes to reshape an agency as large and cumbersome as the CNMI's Department of Education, but running in second position on a slate reputedly firmly controlled by the garment industry's tycoon is bound to be at least as frustrating.

Inos has run for lieutenant governor once before. It was evident to observers then that she was selected to serve as a symbol, rather than as a contributing partner to the ticket. That Inos would allow herself to be placed in a similar position a second time is puzzling, as well as disappointing.

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The other woman running for lieutenant governor, Brigitte Ichihara, is not in quite as deplorable a situation as is Inos. But there is weakness in that slate as well. The Borja-Ichihara ticket has less experience in office than any of the other candidates. On this slate, it is the candidate for governor, Jesse Borja, who has run once before and lost.

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The conflict between family and money - faced by many people during election times - has rarely been revealed as openly as it was on the front page of this past Monday's <I>Tribune</I>. The paper is underwritten by garment tycoon Willie Tan, and is quite evidently former Tan official Benigno S. Fitial's biggest mouthpiece in his campaign for governor. After Fitial's kick-off rally this past week-end, the <I>Tribune</I>'s front page ran a big color picture of Fitial and Inos at the rally, together with a front page story on the campaign promises being made by the two.

Immediately below the Fitial picture appears a second color picture, only slightly smaller, this time of rival candidate Jesse Borja and his running mate Brigitte Ichihara, together with a front page story, immediately adjacent to both pictures, of that slate's campaign promises.

One could argue that this shows impartiality, except for the fact that not one of the four other gubernatorial candidates is even mentioned. The truth of the matter is that the <I>Tribune</I>'s publisher, by marriage, is closely related to Jesse Borja. Which once again proves that politics sure makes strange bed-fellows.

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Trying to be a public-minded citizen isn't easy, as has been noted here before. The roof leaks at the CNMI Museum. It leaks where an addition that was built is attached to the main building. It leaks so badly that the wall is visibly stained along one of the main exhibit halls. It also leaks on the other side of the wall, in the men's restroom. The leak, if left unrepaired, can only get bigger, can only cause more damage, not only to the structure, but also to the museum contents.

The Museum is under the CNMI government, and thus is funded - just barely - by the CNMI, which means that money for repairs is non-existent. But it should be possible to get the roof repaired through voluntary contributions. The problem is that there is no estimate available as to how much money is needed to repair the leak. And trying to raise funds without knowing how much is needed is not only difficult but also embarrassing.

This aspiring public-minded citizen offered to find someone who'd give a "pro bono" estimate. Offered to help raise funds once the amount needed was known. Both offers were, in essence, ignored. "We'll be in touch," was the actual response, and that was some time ago. Scary.

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While the stock market has been no kinder to the Retirement Fund than it has to the rest of us investors, surely that should not excuse the pathetic condition of the American flag flown at the Retirement Fund building. It doesn't even look like the American flag, with its washed-out nearly-white field of stars. Particularly in such an eminent position - at the top of Capitol Hill, across from the Administration building - common courtesy calls for more respect than that.