

On My Mind

4/20/01

“Better late than never” goes the saying, but in two instances that popped up this week, one has to wonder why “late” took as long as it has. The first instance is the legislators’ belated awareness of the scam that CNMI government employees have been working for quite some time - retiring to draw their retirement bonus, and then immediately being re-hired to go back to work at their very same position, but now many thousand dollars richer.

The abuse has been mentioned in the press before, it has been well-known among island residents, and it has obviously been known about by the Retirement Fund and Civil Service and every other agency involved in signing off on government employee personnel actions. Yet only now has the legislature decided to take an interest? What took them so long???????

Must be that the drain on Retirement Fund resources has finally gotten large enough to hit them where it hurts - draining money from the funds they’d planned on spending for pet projects of their own.

The second instance is the revelation by Senator “Kumoi” Guerrero that the site for the new power plant is PCB-contaminated. The new power plant has been under discussion for how many years? The latest PCB clean-up on Saipan has been on-going now for how many months?

The Senator has known of the problem for how long? Yet only now has the problem been aired? Why now? Why not years ago?

The Senator told this writer that CUC was as well aware as he was of the situation, and that rightly, the alarm should have been raised by CUC. One can’t argue the logic of that. Nevertheless, the timing - only after the Enron contract to build the new power plant has fallen through - is very strange. One would have thought that a responsible citizen with that sort of knowledge would have spoken out long before now.

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Yet another controversy is brewing among residents, legislators and the executive branch: the use of public land in Kagman. Legislators seeking votes in this election year have apparently promised Kagman residents a community park in an area that had long been set aside as part of an on-going flood control plan for the Kagman watershed area. Local Bill 12-25, passed by both houses, would set aside 27 hectares of public land for an arboretum and community park in Kagman, and is now on the Governor’s desk awaiting his review.

However, the land identified for the park in the bill had earlier been set aside as part of a planned \$70 million irrigation project - funded, in large part, by the federal government - that includes a reservoir, a 100,000 gallon water tank and a water distribution system that will not only benefit Kagman farmers but will also prevent flooding throughout the entire area. Kagman has the richest agricultural land on Saipan.

The Secretary of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources has said that plans are already underway to establish recreation areas in elsewhere in Kagman, as well as a baseball field and two more beach parks, according to an article in Wednesday's <I>Variety</I>.

Unfortunately, too few of the government's decision-makers seem to understand the significance of differences in soil composition for successful agricultural development, and too few seem able to grasp the significance of long-range planning. On the other hand, such understanding is not intuitive - is not inborn. It is achieved only through education. And clearly neither DLNR nor the Soil Conservation Service have done enough in the way of educating the residents of Kagman or the members of the Office of Public Lands, or the members of the legislature as to the relationship between good soil and productive farming, between appropriate infrastructure and flood control, between over-all benefits and political opportunism.

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The proposal that Rota and Tinian pay power rates based on the cost of providing them with electricity appears punitive, to say the least. It was bad enough when CUC cut off power to non-paying government offices on those islands, but not on Saipan. But to force them to pay power rates three and four times higher than those on Saipan is just outrageous.

It's another example of CUC's insular thinking - not being able to see the forest for the trees. CUC has never understood that it makes no sense to expect users to pay more for water produced by a desalination plant than other users - because the desalinated water means there is more water for everyone, so everyone should help pay for the desalination plant.

Now it doesn't understand that smaller islands with smaller populations should not be charged more for power simply because they have not yet reached critical mass. It makes perfect sense for Saipan to subsidize the other islands - we are all residents of the CNMI, and, in this case, should be treated identically, differing costs notwithstanding.

Does anyone know what other multi-island entities do under similar circumstances?

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Do reporters write their stories with their minds turned off? An item appeared in both local papers about a group identifying itself as the Pacific Islands Cultural Artists, which is scheduled to exhibit its art work at the Hyatt from April 20-24. Featured, said the item, would be "contemporary cultural artists" including works by David and Phillip Sablan, Joe Guerrero and Doug Rankin.

Those dates overlap the CNMI Arts Councils Flame Tree Art Festival dates, which will be taking place from April 20-22 across the street at American Memorial Park. So why aren't the PICA artists included in the Flame Tree Festival? That's an obvious question that, one would think, would come naturally to mind to anyone reading about the PICA show - to any reader, in other words, of the paper. Yet neither paper pursued the question, neither paper offers any

explanation.

Instead, the papers took what appears to have been a news release issued by PICA, and ran it without giving it any thought.

For those who might wonder: the group is from Guam - with the exception of Rankin, of course. And their artists will be participating in the Arts Festival as well.

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Another example of reporters writing their stories with their minds turned off: a story that again appeared in both papers this past week announcing, through the Governor's Office of Women's Affairs, a tech workshop for women that offered extensive hands-on-training on computers and networking, among other things. But there wasn't a clue, in either story, as to when the workshop would be held, or where, or whom to contact for more information. Again, however, neither paper pursued the obvious questions. Instead, the papers took what appears to have been a news release, and ran it without giving it any thought.

The workshop is scheduled to take place in Seoul, Korea, July 2-8; additional information is available from the Office of Women's Affairs at 288-7365.

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Island beautification is going apace - with more of those proverbial swaying palm trees being planted and braced all over the place. The problem is, they're getting planted in all the old places - along with existing flame trees, oleanders, and half-a-dozen other blossoming shrubs and colorful plants - along Beach Road.

The road to the airport from Beach Road isn't being beautified. The road to Marpi isn't being beautified. Middle Road isn't being beautified - except for that one bright spot in the Gualo Rai area, where smooth white rounds have been used to set off small flowerbeds. The road from Susupe south isn't being beautified.

Guess tourists aren't supposed to go there.