

On My Mind

5/25/01

The debate about the need for a prolonged residency requirement in order to qualify as a voter in island elections has apparently not yet been laid to rest. The law establishing the longer residency requirement went into effect fairly recently, but the election commission has already raised the issue yet again, and now wants the law amended to make the residency requirement consonant with requirements on the mainland.

It would not matter so much if only a few potential vote(r)s were at issue, but the fact is that hundreds of potential voters are involved - enough to make a significant difference in island election results. Each fall, hundreds of new teachers arrive on island to teach in the schools in the CNMI - people who are not familiar with the islands, its customs, its history, its traditions. Under the proposed amendment to the eligibility requirements, less than two months after they arrive, these people would be eligible to cast their vote for members of the legislature, for governor.

The problem this poses can best be illustrated by looking at a real-life example: the announced candidacy of the latest Covenant convert, former Chamber of Commerce president Tony Pellegrino, for a seat in the legislature. Ordinarily, his chances would appear pretty slim - with all due respect, one can hardly credit him with the outstanding, unblemished and uncontroversial reputation one would expect would be needed to succeed as the first haole member of the legislature. But if the votes of the hundreds of new teacher-residents are taken into account, his political chances take on very different odds. Few of those new teacher-residents will have had the time or opportunity to learn much more about Pellegrino than that he is president of the board of education. With little else to go on, that would no doubt be quite a persuasive credential in their eyes.

To vote intelligently, however, it would seem important that they also knew and understood the significance of the formation of the Covenant party, its tactics and its backers; his relationship to House Speaker and Covenant party candidate for governor Benigno Fitial; his involvement in the outer cove marina and Splash Island; the role in island politics of garment industry mogul Willie Tan..... That new resident-voters would learn all that within their first 50 days on island - as they were moving in to new quarters, adjusting to a new job, trying to familiarize themselves with island ways - is highly doubtful.

It has been argued that "compelling reason" must be found to exempt the CNMI from the 30-50 day constitutional norm that exists on the mainland. Once again, it apparently needs pointing out that while it is true that the CNMI is "a member of the American political family," conditions here are not identical to those on the mainland. In a place as small as this, politics has come to play a major role in every aspect of island life. Participation in the election process of large numbers of people who do not know or understand this could quite literally have a devastating impact on all our lives. That should be compelling reason enough.

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One of the topics that should be discussed at the much-touted "tourism summit" scheduled to be held next week is the practice of "agent commissions" - the extortion, if you will, that tour guides demand of vendors in exchange for bringing tourists to vendor sites. As far back as the mid-eighties, this practice has killed enterprising local businesses that have chosen to stand on principle, and to not succumb to the extortionate demands of tour bus drivers, tour leaders, or other travel agency minions.

In general, it appears to be the big, mostly non-indigenous, homogenized businesses that are willing to pay the price to bring in the tourists - Dutyfree, Hakuboton, JoeTen, Country House. Or those that are foreign-owned, -operated, and no doubt -subsidized, like Ming Palace, Dollar Days, Maui Divers....

But smaller, locally owned, operated and oriented ventures, like Louis and Kathy Benavente's handicraft shop full of imports from the rest of Micronesia - a real treasure trove of the mid-80's - or Pacific Gardenia, a present victim, or even the government-funded museum - all have floundered, because they have refused to play the game.

Even the Visitor Authority's own "Taste of the Marianas" is apparently floundering because tour guides were not paid to bring the event to the attention of their tourists.

The practice of promoting business through "enticements" may be standard operating procedure in Asian countries. And it's true that most customers here in the CNMI, and even most vendors, are Asian-related. But the effect of the practice is discriminatory to local vendors, particularly the smaller businesses. It also has the effect of closing tourists off from exposure to local products and culture.

It's about time that the practice, and alternative options, be seriously re-evaluated.

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Though not local, another venture that will probably also suffer from the need to pay agent commissions in order to attract tourists is the about-to-open "MagicLand" show. Without pay-offs to travel agents, it is doubtful that MagicLand will reap enough profit to have made its visit worthwhile. Which may even discourage it from returning ever again.

Which is a pity. The show offers tourists something else to do on island than tour WWII sites, spend money shopping or getting sunburned on the beach - something the CNMI badly needs. It is particularly attractive to children of all ages (or to the child in all of us?), and could even have been the focus of MVA's planned "children in paradise" campaign.

Unfortunately, the Marianas Visitor's Authority has, instead, decided to ignore the show entirely.

It is not mentioned on a single copy of its list of tourism month activities. Could it be that even the MVA itself requires "enticements" before it will promote tourism-friendly events????

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Then there's the Liberation Day activity - scheduled to begin June 1, which also has kiddie rides. (One wonders whether either group knew of the other's plans. Instead of competing, it would have been nice if ways could have been found for them to complement each other.) And the Third International Festival of Culture scheduled to take place the end of July. Both of these, too, have potential as tourist attractions. Will MVA promote them? Or will they too suffer from the apparently MVA-sanctioned practice of "no commission - no tourists"?

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Short takes: Isn't it interesting that with all the confusion about whether the recently-passed law establishing the new communications commission does or does not need amendment, and if so where and how, not one word has been said about how the legislature ended up in this mess to begin with? For those with a short memory, it all came about because then-acting governor Paul A. Manglona took it upon himself to sign the bill into law - despite the concerns and reservations expressed by the governor's legal, technical and legislative advisors. The morale of the story is: Look Before You Leap.

Kudos to the Tinian Dynasty for its leadership role in cleaning Tinian's Tachogna lagoon and beach area. Its ongoing efforts to serve the community despite harassment from some government sectors are indeed noteworthy.

Two items those who do not read "the other paper" may want to know about: there will be a public hearing Thursday, May 31, on the CNMI Office of Public Lands' CRM permit application to open 55.52 hectares of public land in Tanapag for 284 homestead lots. The hearing is at 6:30 p.m. at the Tanapag school.

CRM will also be holding a public hearing on L&T group of companies' application to convert the Guerrero Brothers warehouse in Tanapag to living quarters capable of housing 200 employees. The hearing is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, June 5, at the Tanapag school.

Neither announcement appeared in the <I>Variety</I>, apparently due to a lack of available funds.