

On My Mind
6/22/01

It's accepted fact that on the islands of Rota and Tinian, while some things, like food, clothing or gas, are more expensive than on Saipan, other things, like rent or land itself, are less expensive. But 24¢ a square meter for public land on Rota? Isn't that carrying things a bit too far? Especially now that what is needed is more government revenue, rather than less? Especially when the commodity is public land - of which the islands have an ever more limited supply?

Yet that is what the Mayor of Rota is offering in exchange for the establishment of a water bottling plant on his island. The offer is being made by the Mayor of Rota, rather than the Office of Public Lands, under the provisions of the Free Trade Zone Act (Public Law 12-20).

Under normal economic situations, things that are scarce become expensive. If they are a desirable commodity, competition for them drives prices even higher. Yet by some quirk, some perverse way of thinking, this has not happened to the pricing of public land in the CNMI. It is an ever-shrinking resource, yet its price has not gone up. In fact, quite the opposite. Land exchanges continue to give away pieces of public land many times larger than the size of the private land for which they are being exchanged.

And now the Mayor of Rota is giving away public land for 24¢ a square meter! With Free Trade Zone industries exempt from taxes, authorized to hire alien labor, eligible for who knows what other kinds of waivers, and now given nearly free land, just where is the alleged benefit to Rota - and the CNMI - supposed to come from?

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Representative Tony Camacho's House Bill 12-234 would require that all government agencies set aside part of their budget to cover utility costs, instead of paying utility costs through a lump sum appropriation covering all three branches of government and independent agencies - as has been done in the past. The bill, intended to reduce power consumption by making agencies accountable for their own power bills, misses the point.

Not all government offices and agencies are, apparently, yet metered. Thus the amount set aside - which has always been inadequate when done as a lump sum - is no more apt to be adequate when set aside by each agency, since agencies will still not be able to determine their actual utility consumption.

It is being argued that requiring individual agencies to pay their own utility bills will encourage conservation, but unless agencies know what their actual consumption is, they will have no incentive to cut down on its use. House Bill 12-234 will only achieve its purpose if it includes mandatory metering of all government agencies.

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Within one week, the two government agencies with perhaps the biggest potential for attracting tourists to the CNMI have been reported as suffering severe shortfalls in budget appropriations. Both the Visitor Authority, and the legislature, seem to be deaf, dumb and blind when it comes to attempts to increase tourism traffic to the CNMI. More airline connections, and more hotel rooms will not accomplish a thing if there is not enough for tourists to do - once they arrive on island - to either prolong their stay, or to make return trips worthwhile.

The “mantra” is that tourists want to shop. But that only holds as long as their budgets allow. Or that tourists like the “sun, sand and sea,” but that only holds as long as there’s good weather and they don’t get sunburned. Then what?

The CNMI does have other attractions. It has a unique history in this Asiatic clime - of intrepid European explorers daring to cross unknown oceans, of early primitive but tranquil ways torn apart by well-intended but misguided missionaries, by determined but insensitive traders, of a devastating war with world-wide involvement. The traces of these events and their after-effects are still evident on island. But tourists to the CNMI are given little means or opportunity to learn about, to see, to explore, to understand them.

Yet it is precisely such exposure, such information, that could bring depth, understanding, and a myriad of alternative activities to tourists to the CNMI, if..... IF the two agencies responsible for collecting, for interpreting, for displaying, the CNMI’s unique history, the many artifacts that attest to that history, the historic sites and remaining physical traces still in place, were appropriately funded. Yet they are not.

Both the CNMI Museum of History and Culture, and the CNMI’s Historic Preservation Office, seem to have fallen off the edge of the table when it comes to allocating budgets for their operation. The Museum has no curator. It is operating on a budget that is less than 1/4th of what it needs to continue operating and maintaining its collections. The Historic Preservation Office is in equally dire straits, also operating with 1/4th of the budget required to maintain its operations.

Both these agencies could be mounting displays, preparing informational videos, issuing publications, enhancing historic sites, offering tours and lectures - and in the case of the HPO, mounting a web site - if they had adequate staff and funds. But they do not. Their potential for enriching the tourist experience, for adding days of things to do, for providing an understanding of the island, its people and its culture, for enhancing the tourists’ understanding of the difference between the CNMI and Guam and Hawaii has not yet been recognized by either the MVA or the legislature.

Looks like both need a lesson in logic. If there’s nothing to attract the tourist, more airlines and hotel rooms just don’t do it.

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And speaking of attracting tourists, how interesting that the MVA is only now suggesting that tour operators make American Memorial Park a part of their itinerary during the annual “Taste of

the Marianas" observance. Touted by the MVA as a tourist attraction, apparently the MVA has not really done very much to promote the event in the past. The majority of participants, apparently, are "still locals, residents, and non-resident workers" according to a story about the lack of tourist attendance at the affair in last week's <I>Tribune</I>.

The story noted that the MVA Chairman said future Taste of the Marianas should aim at attracting more tourists. It's taken three years to figure that out? Maybe MVA needs more than a lesson in logic?

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And while on the subject of money ill-spent, looks like the AG's most traveled attorney is at it again, this time to observe a demonstration of the treatment of PCBs by indirect thermal adsorption in Indio, California. Wouldn't it make better sense - and be far more cost-effective - to send someone with background and experience in chemistry, physics, the environment, and/or pollution????

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The current wave of frustration and dissatisfaction with the CNMI's form of municipal government is not new. Local government has been an issue - and a very contentious one at that - ever since the first constitutional convention. Every con-con since has tampered with the provisions for local government.

Now legislators want to introduce an initiative doing away with the local delegation concept, in which the elected legislative representatives from each of the islands are empowered to pass local laws on behalf of their island, and give this power to the municipal councils. It is not clear whether, and if so, where, the mayors fit into this proposal.

The question is important enough, complicated enough, controversial enough to warrant more than campaign rhetoric in the way of education for the community. Here is an instance where the creation and funding of a task force to thoroughly explore the issues, identify and evaluate alternatives, and come up with a recommended solution is fully justified. Since an initiative need not be held during regular elections, there would be no need to rush to resolution by November. The task force could be given sufficient time to do the job properly.

With a shrinking economy, and ever-improving technology, it is high time for some innovative, creative thinking in dealing with such a sensitive issue, but one thing not needed is the pressure of time.

Members of the municipal councils, the legislative delegations, the Mayors, should work together to design a task force, a charge to that task force, and funding for the work involved, rather than once again coming up with some strained compromise as temporary as the last one was.