

On My Mind

7/13/01

Though many deny it, there really is a lot of similarity between Guam and the CNMI. Or maybe it's a similarity in human nature in general? For example, just look at how the education board in each of the two entities is attempting to cope with budget shortfalls. The CNMI threatens to drop kindergarten programs; in Guam the threat is to drop the Gifted and Talented program, and to curtail the kindergarten program as well. At the legislative level, the CNMI threatens to cut into retirement benefits, on Guam the threat is to curtail everybody's pay check.

In every case, the ploy is the same: if more funds are needed, push the hot button. Take a popular program, and threaten to drop or cut it unless more funds are made available from somewhere or other. NMC was particularly adept at this - it generally threatened to drop scholarship programs in its attempts to pressure the legislature when it ran short of funds.

As a story in the <I>Pacific Daily News</I> earlier this week reports, however, some of Guam's teachers believe there are better ways to save money in the education department. Among the suggestions made by Guam's Department of Education teachers union: assign all certified teachers in the department to the classroom; transfer central office administrators to school assignments; require secondary principals to teach one or two classes per day.

Those suggestions make a lot of sense, and could easily be implemented here in the CNMI as well. In addition to requiring that secondary principals teach one or two classes a day, perhaps even the elementary and junior-high teachers could teach a couple of hours per day to compensate for a shortage of teachers.

The point is that there are ways of cutting costs without threatening to do away with popular programs - sensible measures that focus on maximizing available assets, that do less damage to over-all programs. The <I>PDN</I> story also raises another issue: the participation of the teachers themselves in trying to find solutions to the problems. There does not seem to be any indication that this is happening in the CNMI. Yet often it is those who are "on the front lines," rather than those in the ivory towers of administration, who are in the best position to identify means of making ends meet, who are able to generate the more creative ideas.

Neither Guam nor the CNMI may feel flattered in being compared, but when faced with similar problems, why not take advantage of solutions, regardless of where they originated? The CNMI's Department and Board of Education might want to take a closer look at some of the suggestions/ideas being proposed on Guam.

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Tanapag's public meeting on PCB cleanup turned out to be more of a disaster than originally anticipated, not so much because of any unhappiness with the stance of the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), but because of guerrilla tactics used by some members of the Tanapag Action Group (TAG). Learning that a translator was to be provided by the ACE, TAG demanded that

every statement be translated, on the spot, into both Chamorro and Carolinian (despite the fact that most Tanapag residents do not speak Carolinian) for those attendees who might be unable to understand English. The demand was made, in Chamorro, by a well-educated TAG member with known fluency in the English language.

Not only did this result in long and very tedious proceedings. It also served to effectively destroy the purpose of the meeting, since the translator was totally unfamiliar with the subject - ACE's proposed alternatives for treating the accumulated stockpiles of PCB contaminated soil - and thus was unable to translate the information - in either the initial presentation or in the subsequent questions and answers - with any degree of fluency or clarity, or, sometimes, accuracy.

Late in the evening - the meeting ran on until about 11:00 p.m. - patience apparently ran out, and discussions ceased being translated. Even the TAG member who'd initially insisted on speaking only in Chamorro, it was reported, used English for his final tirade.

The ACE had worked hard to prepare for the meeting - there were appropriate handouts - clear and well-written, a one-page fact sheet - again, well-done - and everything from the agenda to outlines of the main points to be covered, in color, hung up on the walls for everyone to see and follow. In addition, a transcription service had been hired to record the entire evening's proceedings.

It's frustrating and disheartening to see members of a community deliberately disrupt earnest, concerted, well-intentioned efforts to inform and involve that community in and about major issues affecting its welfare.

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A reader commented that one reason the Commonwealth Ports Authority is constantly in need of new funding sources is due to the high salary paid its superfluous consultant(s).

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Two weeks from now an event that could be a major tourist attraction will be held on Saipan - the third annual CNMI International Festival of Culture. But, according to the festival chairman, as reported in today's issue of the <I>Tribune</I>, only "some" tourists are expected to attend. Why only some? Why not hordes? The Visitors Authority is, apparently, contributing to the funding for the festival. It would seem only logical that it would also promote it. Given the low level of expectation, however, it would seem that either the promotion efforts are not very successful, or the promotion effort itself has not been very vigorous.

The same fate befell the CNMI's Liberation Day festivities. A <I>Variety</I> article early last week reported that Japan Air Lines sales manager, Yasuyoshi Kinoshita, "said that Liberation Day activities could have been a very good opportunity for CNMI to invite Japanese tourists to visit the islands. However, for some reason, the event and other previous local festivals were not promoted in Japan."

If the Senate has time, maybe it should conduct an oversight hearing into just where MVA's moneys go, how they're spent, and who makes the decisions?

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This week's announcement of new pictures at the Hollywood Theatres goes a long way toward explaining why tourists aren't tempted to come to Saipan take in the American movie scene. It's because Saipan isn't getting good movies. And because whoever makes the call on which movies to pull, and which to leave for another week, isn't showing much sales sense either.

The highly-praised film "Chocolat," for example, never came to Saipan. "Shrek" - also highly praised - has already left, as has "Knight's Tale," but "Atlantis," a real bomb, is still here. The theory is that the CNMI has been assigned a category of films appropriate to rural, low-to-middle-income audiences, totally ignoring the fact that while the over-all population is small, that doesn't mean there aren't sophisticated movie-goers here.

If tourists are to be enticed to the theater - and if attendance by more island residents is desired - someone in the chain of command needs to see that the demographic labeling of the CNMI is corrected.

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Two colorful columnists have left the <I>Tribune</I>, Charlie Reyes to run for office with the Covenant Party, and Ed Stephens for reasons of his own. This columnist didn't always agree with what they said, but both had an enviable way with words that added spark and interest to the paper. They shall be missed.