

On My Mind
11/02/01

Tomorrow is election day. It is tempting to hold off the column until the results are known, but rather than babble under pressure (and regardless of the outcome there's bound to be cause to babble), I prefer a more reasoned approach, with time to let the implications sink in, time to observe others' reactions and to distill my own.....

Despite the many candidates, thanks to four slates this year, there are positions for which I am hard-pressed to pick a candidate I'm willing to vote for, and I may well just not do so. While both the Republican and the Democratic party did finally print all four sample ballots in one paper or the other, only the <I>Tribune</I>, in its advertising supplement to its 10/31 issue, provided a comprehensive view of the entire ballot. Only there, in fact, did I first see the full slate of candidates for the Board of Education, for the Municipal Council.

Being non-political candidates, they don't have access to party funds to help support their campaigns - a loss not only to the candidates but also to the voters, who thus have only limited opportunity to check out their choices. That doesn't matter much, sorry to say, as far as the Municipal Council goes - its function isn't all that critical. But it matters considerably as far as the Board of Education goes, for its members bear a major responsibility for the operation of the CNMI's public school system.

Whether it come from the Department of Education, the Board of Elections, an act of the Legislature or the Executive Department budget, it's about time that a program was established to underwrite "voter education" about candidates for the Board of Education. It seems rather short-sighted to leave election of the Board members so totally to chance.

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As has been noted here before, elections are good business, and economists miss out, in my opinion, by not taking into account, in their discussion of the CNMI economy, the income that regularly is generated by the CNMI's election campaigning, particularly during gubernatorial elections. It would be interesting to see the statistics. Do the newspapers - with all the ads they sell - and printers - with all the posters they produce - show the largest increase in income? Or is it the grocery stores with all the rice, chicken, soda sold for pocket meetings and rallies? The beer wholesalers? Canopy rental outfits? Speaker system rentals?

All in all, enormous amounts of money are spent in the local economy. Which presumably trickles back into the CNMI's revenue resources in taxes and fees of one sort or another. Of course, the other side of the coin is: whose money was spent? And how will that be recouped? Not everyone had a backer with pockets as deep as did the Covenant party.

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It doesn't speak well for the media that all have taken at face value the reasons provided by

Congressman Dino M. Jones and the Tanapag Action Group (TAG) for opposing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE)'s decision to treat Tanapag's PCB-contaminated soil on island, rather than sending it off-island for disposal. Both claim that treating the soil on-island violates their right to a clean and healthy environment. And to back up their objections, Jones is threatening to sue the ACE, among others, while TAG members are threatening to set up blockades at the PCB treatment site in Tanapag - all of which has been duly reported by the media.

The stories all explain that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has given the ACE conditioned approval to use what is known as the Indirect Thermal Desorption (ITD) process to strip PCB's from the contaminated soil, and to ship only the residual PCB's off-island for final disposal. The articles note at some length that Jones and the TAG are unhappy about this decision because they feel the continued presence of the PCB-contaminated soil is a threat to their environment. But no reporter appears to have made any effort to confirm or validate that reasoning.

The truth of the matter is that the contaminated soil will sit in Tanapag longer if the decision is made to ship it off-island for treatment. The ACE has stated that it will take several years to ship the untreated soil off island because of the high costs - estimated at \$18 million - involved. ACE spokesmen have said that that large a sum simply isn't available in a single budgetary year for application to a single project. Funds would have to be budgeted out over several years to meet the cost of removing all 20,000 tons of PCB-contaminated material to the mainland.

Moreover, the process involved in moving the soil from the site to the port for shipment off-island will expose more people to more contaminated soil and dust than would the process of moving the soil from its present location into the on-site treatment equipment.

In contrast, the process of treating the contaminated soil on-island, according to the work schedule drawn up by the ACE and its contractor, is slated for completion by the end of July 2002 - in less than one year - and that includes restoration of the entire work site. Total cost for treating the entire 20,000 tons of contaminated soil on-island is estimated to be about \$7 million.

The decision to treat the soil on-island is supported by an evaluation of treatment alternatives conducted by the ACE which was reviewed and approved by the EPA. This "focused feasibility study" was distributed to the Tanapag community for comment, and was also available on the Internet. In fact, two members of TAG went to Indio, California at the invitation of the ACE to view a demonstration of the ITD process. Various sources have reported that the two TAG members acknowledged that they thought the ITD process would work, but that they should not be expected to support it publicly once they returned to Saipan.

TAG's public position, however, continues to be that all of the PCB-contaminated soil should be taken off-island without treatment and treated elsewhere, because having it sit in Tanapag and undergo treatment on island will endanger the community by the continued presence of the contaminated soil.

There doesn't seem much justification for the position being taken by TAG and Congressman

Jones. Are there other reasons for their opposition? Rumor says there are, but Jones and TAG members aren't saying, and the media isn't asking.

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The newspapers' published letters to the editor are, on the one hand, generally more civil than some I've seen, but what ever happened to the press policy that clearly political letters are not published? The <I>Variety</I>'s policy states that letters <I>endorsing</I> particular political candidates are discouraged, but apparently letters <I>criticizing</I> particular candidates are not? Or? The <I>Tribune</I> policy doesn't state any restriction.

While some of the letters have made for interesting reading, and it is true that they fill up the space that printing all those ads provides, the fact that they are printed at all is of some concern. Particularly when the choice of letters is allowed to reflect the particularly bias of the paper itself.

Perhaps the local papers need to re-examine their code of ethics? Assuming they have one, of course.....

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The CNMI's celebration of Citizenship Day marks the day President Ronald Reagan, formally acknowledging the finding of the U.N. Security Council that the U.S. had fulfilled its responsibility under the Trusteeship Agreement, declared that the Trusteeship no longer applied to the CNMI. The declaration was made on November 3, 1986. This year that coincides with election day; one wonders why observation of Citizenship Day was not set for Friday, or perhaps even, this particular year, on Saturday, November 3.

Nevertheless, though Citizenship Day is not celebrated until Monday, it is fitting that the opportunity to exercise one of democracy's most valuable benefits - the right to vote - occurs over the same week-end. May that right be exercised prudently and intelligently!