

On My Mind  
11/16/01

It's not clear whether the fault lies with the reporters who, under pressure to generate "new" stories every day, regurgitate the same old thing, or whether the fault lies, in this instance, with Senator Pete P. Reyes, who keeps saying that CUC was wrong to cancel the Enron contract for construction of a new generator plant. Just this week, after one would have thought the dust had settled and breathed a sigh of relief that the CNMI wasn't committed, any longer, to a multi-million dollar deal that was made when the economy was strong but would have been a disaster in today's weak economy, the paper ran another story on Reyes and his insistence that the project be revived.

<br><br>

There may be problems with the system - Reyes cites the occasional power outages as proof - but that doesn't mean that there is a shortage of power. The outages could as easily be due to a lack of proper maintenance, or a need for new equipment, or simply lack of staff training. Moreover, the CNMI power system is in much better shape than Guam's, where daily scheduled power outages seem to be the norm. Yet no one is talking of building new generator systems on Guam.

<br><br>

Judging from reports in the papers, CUC is well out from under in canceling its contract with Enron. This week, the <I>Pacific Daily News</I> reported that Enron Corporation was about to be bought out by its smaller rival, Dynergy Inc. "The announcement came after Enron's stock plummeted about 80 percent in the last three weeks over concerns that the company wasn't revealing serious financial problems to shareholders," the paper said.

<br><br>

A story earlier in the month said Enron stock had fallen upon news that the Securities and Exchange Commission was investigating partnership dealings led by Enron's former chief financial officer who was forced out of office because of questions about the arrangements.

<br><br>

As early as August of this year, the <I>International Herald Tribune</I> reported that Enron's chief executive Jeffrey Skilling had quit after only six months on the job. According to the report, Enron had been considered "the biggest and most aggressive of the new breed of unregulated energy traders that daily buy and sell billions of dollars of electricity and other commodities." But its shares have fallen this year due to problems with some of its investments, and criticism from officials in California, among others.

<br><br>

It is, of course, good management to look ahead and plan for future needs. But projected future needs - in light of current local and world economic performance - are far different from the needs projected at the time the bids for the so-called Enron project were first drawn up. The answer to the needs as foreseen then simply do not apply in today's economy, or in either the local or the world economy projected for the near future.

<br><br>

The good Senator should accept the fact that circumstances have changed and that CUC expansion is not needed at the moment. Either that, or reporters should stop dredging up the same old story. Or maybe both.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

Along the lines of shutting the barn door after the horse has been stolen, the CNMI's Chief Justice has just issued rather draconian rules prohibiting any member of the court system from offering any comment on the system unless first cleared through the Chief Justice. No one may present a budget, confer with members of the legislature, speak to the press - according to the newspaper accounts of the new rules - without having first obtained permission from the Chief Justice.

<br><br>

All this, it would appear, to prevent another occurrence of what happened at the Law Revision Commission, when its director voiced objection to members of the Commission Board about the Chief Justice's re-programming of Commission funds. Since the new administrative rules were not yet in place, it would appear that the Chief Justice took care of that problem by simply firing the Director. But now the Chief Justice has taken steps to make sure that it won't happen again.

<br><br>

And that's worrisome. The Law Revision Commission provides useful services both to the legal community and to the community at large - current, easy access to all the legal documents from the CNMI Constitution to local laws that govern the people of the CNMI. It could do more - put the Code on-line, for example, or provide indices - if it had the funds, but it doesn't. It takes all the funding that it gets just to keep present services timely, accurate and accessible. Its budget deserves an increase, not a decrease.

<br><br>

It is also worrisome that such rigid lines of control are being imposed upon the judiciary system. Of course, no administrator wants to be embarrassed by inappropriate comments from lesser staff, but assuming there's nothing to hide, open communication is a far more effective management tool than censorship.

<br><br>

What makes it even more worrisome, however, is the fact that there is no one to speak for either the members of the judiciary system or the Law Revision Commission. The members of the CNMI Bar, who benefit most directly from the work of the Law Revision Commission, dare not speak out for fear that they may, one day, have to appear in the courtroom before the Chief Justice. Who, then, remains to speak out for the Commission, for the judiciary?

<br><br>

The government's system of checks and balances provides for a check on the judiciary branch by the legislative branch as well as the executive branch. Perhaps it's time the other branches flexed their muscles.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

One of the things that didn't happen this year is the Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives' annual conference. It was scheduled to be held at the Tinian Dynasty from November 6-9. Attendance was expected from every state of the Federated States of Micronesia, from the Republics of Palau and the Marshalls, from Guam, American Samoa, Australia, Hawaii and the mainland, as well as a smattering of other Pacific island countries.

<br><br>

Members of PIALA were due to elect a new president and a new treasurer of the association; current president is Christine Scott-Smith, director of Guam's public library system. The conference itself was to offer a myriad of workshops and program presentations based on this year's theme of "Casting the Net."

<br><br>

PIALA, a regional library association, was formed in 1990 by a handful of librarians on Guam and Saipan. It has grown over the years, and now attracts a wide group of public, school and special librarians from Micronesia and beyond. Sessions at past conferences have dealt with such things as building classroom web pages, repairing books, accessing medical libraries, conducting interviews for oral history collections, the value of reading, the role of myth, legend and folklore, library practices throughout the Pacific, cataloging collections, encouraging library use and how to promote and facilitate resource sharing among member libraries.

<br><br>

The conference was canceled, according to its planning committee, because of the disruptions in air traffic, etc., caused by last month's terrorist attacks. Next year's conference is slated to be held in Chuuk.

<br><br>

<center>\* \* \*</center>

<br><br>

While it may appear that this column is far too critical of the Marianas Visitors Bureau and its efforts to promote tourism, it's awfully difficult to ignore its perceived failures and shortcomings in light of the fact that while the CNMI economy is heavily dependent on tourism, the agency responsible for developing that tourism appears to be spending incredible amounts of the CNMI's limited income with very little effect.

<br><br>

But the latest example: its touted new website: mymarianas.com. In the first place, it proclaims that the CNMI's greatest attractions are: beautiful clean water, romantic beaches, spectacular sunsets, abundant sealife, underwater experiences and world-class golf. No mention of its historic interest. No mention of its culture. Moreover, not only does the CNMI no longer have the pristine lagoon waters, or the abundant sealife, it once did, but its beaches - full of trash, invaded by boonie dogs, aren't all that romantic any more, either.

<br><br>

On top of that, the site - so far - consists of only the first page. There is no more - at least not on my computer. It would have been far more prudent to hold off announcement of the site until it was up and running. But then, that's typical.