

On My Mind

2/22/02

This space has urged, more than once, that incoming legislators be given orientation sessions on pending issues, basic background data, procedures. This year that has, and is, taking place and that is all to the good. What this space has not thought to urge is the need for orientation sessions - or at the very least, an orientation and procedures manual - for incoming governors. But certainly, this incoming governor would seem a prime candidate.

Perhaps if there had been such an orientation manual, those eight weeks between election and inauguration would have been put to better use, and the governor would have been ready, on his first day in office, to put in place his clerical and professional staff - having already confirmed their availability, their positions, titles, salaries, the mechanics of the process.

Perhaps he might also have been ready with a list of department heads, and would have prioritized the boards and commissions needing immediate appointments.

The manual might also have discussed the advantage of having ready, upon inauguration, a set of specific targets for action, some specific scenarios - perhaps the actual draft of a bill or two ready for submittal to the legislature - to demonstrate to the public that there was more to the election campaign than empty promises.

The manual might have discussed the importance of viewing gubernatorial personnel actions within the context of the government as a whole, rather than as a private and privileged domain where neither precedent nor the economy mattered.

Certainly, there have been more than the usual number of embarrassing incidents in the short time the governor has been in office. It is nice to think that an orientation manual might have made a difference - and to urge, herewith, that the responsibility for preparing one be assigned to one of the plethora of gubernatorial special assistants.

But even a manual probably would not have gone so far as to discuss the risks inherent in appointing comely lasses to high-falutin positions for which they've little known qualification. Or in scheduling overlapping travel itineraries.

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The first bill signed into law by the new administration was, by its own admission, messed up. The second bill signed into law was no better. While designated Public Law 12-87, rather than P.L. 31-2, since it fell within the 40 days allowed for passage even from the previous legislature, responsibility for its enactment falls to the current administration.

P.L. 12-87's predecessor, P.L. 12-77, had banned scuba and hookah spear-fishing altogether. The new law rescinds the absolute ban, allowing scuba and hookah spear-fishing on Saipan's

eastern shore, and on Tinian and Rota. No more enforceable than P.L. 12-14 - the original "Fair Fishing Act" which banned spear-fishing within 1,000 feet outside the reef - this version, in addition, defeats the purpose the law was intended to meet in the first place - to provide more fish for those using traditional methods. We won't even mention the suggestion - in the transmittal letter signed by the acting governor - that existing scuba enterprises be "grandfathered" in through a devious interpretation of the original law.

The CNMI now has the distinction of being one of the very few places in the entire Pacific where spear-fishing on scuba is still allowed.

Will the third law through the legislature follow this unfortunate pattern? Reports have it that legislation is forthcoming to support a settlement of the suit filed against the government by businessman Tony Pellegrino's Marine Vitalization Corporation. But just why the CNMI should pay Pellegrino anything for his poorly-planned and poorly executed Outer Cove Marina is not at all clear. When will the good laws start?

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Congressman William Torres is attempting to once again revive the dream originated at the office of the Mayor of the Northern Islands that development of the Northern Islands is a simple matter that could solve a myriad of the CNMI's economic problems if only people would just throw some money at it - or make it easier for other people to throw money at it.

The fact is that it's not at all clear that even the most affluent of developers, given the most generous of tax breaks, could begin to afford the amount of money needed to make development in the Northern Islands commercially viable.

The obstacles are formidable. There is little level land. There are no good harbors. There is no infrastructure - no road, no power plant, no water distribution system. Just constructing an air- and a seaport - so materials, equipment, labor and supplies can be brought in - constitutes a major logistical, not to mention fiscal, challenge.

Unfortunately, the Northern Islands offer no critical mass, no economy of scale. Every single item will cost more to deliver in the relatively small quantities that would be called for, because there is no one with whom to share the cost of shipping anything to the Northern Islands.

No one has put numbers to these issues. How many hotel rooms would be required to recover the cost of building a hotel, the harbor, the roads, the infrastructure? At what occupancy rate? Over what period of time? One has but to look at the troubled Tinian Dynasty for proof that size is not the answer. Nor is time. Nor are government pledges. And the Dynasty had the advantage of an island infrastructure already in place.

It is tempting to turn to Northern Islands development as a solution to the weak tourism market in Rota, Tinian, Saipan. But without more realistic expectations, the more likely outcome of such dreams is apt to mimic what has happened on Saipan: all smoke and no fire - leases signed

but construction never begun, construction begun but never finished, facilities opened only to close within the year.

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Eco-tourism does have potential in the Northern Islands. But then, it also has potential in the "Southern Islands" as well. In fact, a model eco-tourism project is now under development by the DEQ: a boardwalk path through the wetlands surrounding Susupe Lake. The wetlands will remain intact; its wildlife will remain undisturbed, and tourists will get first-hand knowledge of a the biological components of a natural geographic feature.

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Now-a-days, eco-tourism seems to mean whatever one wants it to, but true eco-tourism is recognized as consisting of small-scale activities where tourists are introduced to and learn about specific aspects of nature; where natural settings and natural habitats are left intact, where the only trace of tourists are their footprints, and the only evidence of their passing the photographs they take.

For the Northern Islands, eco-tourism activities might include forest walks to find megapodes and other wildlife, mountain hikes to volcano craters, and on Pagan, to the two brackish lakes, the remnants of a recent massive lava flow, and traces of World War II occupation. On some islands, fruit bats can still be seen.

Accommodation in true eco-tourism style would consist of small cottages for which water would be provided through water catchment systems, and power through solar panels. The demonstration of self-sufficiency could itself be used to appeal to tourists as a model of successful eco-tourism.

The Northern Islands do have potential for development. The challenge is to make sure plans for development are based on reality, and that those plans preserve, protect and maintain the natural resources that form the basis of that potential.