

On My Mind
3/8/02

Thanks to Saipan Local Law 12-22, which allocates money from poker machines to provide “environmental enhancement” to Middle Road, the aforesaid road is finally getting its share of tourism beautification. Flowers, shrubs and trees have been planted along various traffic light crossroads on what has long been one of the ugliest stretches of road on Saipan. Four landscape firms are taking part, and they’ve each agreed to take on particular sites: Calvo’s, Tropical Garden, JM Associates, and Landscapers Micronesia.

From Garapan south, Middle Road has long been a desert when it comes to beautification efforts, with only a few businesses making any attempt to improve the barrenness left when construction finished. In contrast, Beach Road, and Middle Road from CHC to the end of Memorial Park, have been given layer upon layer of new plantings. So it’s nice to see the grass cut, and plants put out along the rest of Middle Road.

But, say people at the Division of Parks and Grounds, which is assisting with the effort, the plants don’t survive. They are being stolen in large quantities, forcing the landscape companies to re-plant again and again, instead of being able to put their money into expanding their planting. A barbed-wire fence until the plants have rooted might help keep thieves out, but what an image it would give the very same tourists the project is trying to please - that the people of the CNMI are STILL “ladrones.”

It’s a no-win situation (except to the thieves). Neither the tourists nor the landscape companies benefit. Anyone with ideas on how to solve the problem, please call one of the landscape companies, the Saipan Nurseryman’s Association, the Division of Parks and Grounds in the Department of Lands and Natural Resources, the Department of Public Safety’s Highway Safety Patrol or the Marianas Visitor Authority, all of whom are involved in the project.

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Elsewhere, some encouraging win-win situations have begun appearing. The implementation of so-called “waste diversion measures” (finding other uses or treatment for materials normally left at the dump) - to reduce the dump’s rate of growth - is long overdue. According to a media report, the Solid Waste Management Division is about to acquire a green waste grinder, which, once installed and functioning, will reduce the amount of trash entering the dump by 10%.

In the works is a plan for diverting garment factory remnants as well. The remnants constitute nearly 30% of the trash entering the dump on a daily basis.

Why it’s taken this long to get these measures underway is beyond understanding. At least it’s happening now, and hopefully, will be expanded to other wastes, and will be applied at the landfill as well.

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The intent expressed by Dr. Hofschneider, acting Secretary of the Public Health Department, to work with doctors in the private sector to promote better service to the community is also encouraging. Good medical care is extremely expensive, and it makes no sense for medical establishments to continue to operate in isolation with wasteful and unnecessary duplication of services in some areas of medicine, and a total absence of services in others. Cooperation and coordination of services should bring better, more affordable, care for everyone.

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Another positive sign is the apparent decision, on the part of both the administration and members of the Legislature, to hold off funding a separate Free Trade Zone program for now. - Acting Governor Diego Benavente told Chamber of Commerce members earlier this week that the administration plans to undertake several of the functions of the FTZ plan on its own, and that establishing a separate office may not be necessary. In turn, the legislature has agreed that with the reprogramming authority provided the Governor, appropriating money to the FTZ plan at this point would serve no purpose.

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Perhaps the most promising sign, though, that things may be changing for the better is the executive session convened by House Speaker Hofschneider earlier this week to address the problems created by Public Law 13-1 - the controversial and hastily-passed law which gave Governor Babauta the authority to appoint his own staff outside the provisions of the Civil Service Commission. Due to attend the meeting with lawmakers were representatives from the Office of the Governor, the Office of Personnel Management, the Civil Service Commission, the Office of the Public Auditor and the office of the Attorney General.

The outcome of the meeting? Agreement by all parties on amendments to P.L. 1-13 that are expected to satisfy not only this administration, but future administrations as well. A draft of the proposed amendments has been promised in two weeks' time. According to Speaker Hofschneider, the open and frank discussion among all in attendance was both productive and constructive.

But what the meeting and the discussion really revealed, a story in today's <I>Tribune</I> quotes the Speaker as saying, is the need to organize all personnel regulations and statutes into a single rational compilation, uniformly applicable to all employees. The <I>Tribune</I> story made no mention of "autonomous agencies" and their separate provisions. But perhaps it is not too much to hope for that such outrageous policies as the CPA's award of 14 annual leave days per pay period to its officers will soon become a thing of the past.

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Other positive signs: the signing of the Saipan Upland Mitigation Bank agreement. The taking off calendar - for the time being, at least - the bill in the U.S. Senate to take control of CNMI

immigration. The Department of Lands and Natural Resources' renewed resolve to collect overdue parking fees at Smiling Cove. The governor's election to president of the Pacific Basin Development Council. The signing of the contract for construction of a new prison.

Not all of these, of course, are due to the new administration. Many are projects that have long been in the works but are only now materializing. Some are mere coincidence. But taken together, they reflect a sense that the CNMI is gaining maturity. There is a willingness to reach out, to share among sectors, to foster creativity, to work cooperatively, to promote accountability.

Let us hope that we will see more - that the pattern continues.

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One thing I don't need more of is pictures of the Miss CNMI-Universe splatted on the front page of the paper. To feature them four times in two weeks, as the <I>Variety</I> has done, seems a bit much. Surely there are other pictures, stories, as deserving of that space?

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I was all set to carp about the awkwardly-named CNMI-USA International Business and Professional College for calling itself a "college" since it does not - as admitted by its own staff - grant degrees, but only certificates. However, my dictionary's definition #3 for the word "college" is "a school, sometimes a university, offering special instruction in professional or technical subjects."

One could, of course, carp about what constitutes a "professional" or "technical" subject. But I won't go there. The people of the CNMI have long needed access to subjects along the lines of those being offered by the IBPC - from customer service, resume writing, and records management to fork lift operator.

What does concern me, though, is whether the school or its instructors are credentialed, and if so, by whom. Most courses seem to be of the one-day variety, and while that's fine for some subjects, for others, such as record management, one day of training would hardly scratch the surface. Again, that all depends on how record management is defined. I guess what I am asking for is some "truth in advertising" here.