

On My Mind  
5/10/02

Instead of imposing a “post facto” increase in user fees on garment factories to raise revenue, how about requiring the garment factories to take on at least some of the costs of disposing of their garment waste? Garment Manufacturing Association President Richard Pierce is right when he complains that increasing a fee that was negotiated to entice garment factories to come to the CNMI in the first place for no other reason than that the government needs money is patently unfair.

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But expecting the garment factories to absorb some of the costs for disposing of the huge amount of waste they generate is neither illogical nor unfair. In fact, it is consistent with a position advocated by environmentally-oriented economists who believe that manufacturers should be held responsible for disposing of the waste they generate. They believe that if industries were mandated to redesign their products so that less of each worn-out refrigerator, for example, ended up on the landfill, and more of it was re-cycled into new models, this would cut down not only on consumption of the earth’s limited resources, but also on the waste that is overflowing landfills throughout the world. Tire manufacturers, for example, would be required to take back their used tires and process them as road fill; plastic manufacturers to provide for the return and recycling of their products; automobile manufacturers to design their products so that more parts could be reconfigured and reused.

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One has to wonder, in fact, just why the quantity of garment waste is so high. It’s not just snippets that are going to the dump, but sizable hunks of cloth. If cutting practices were improved, wouldn’t the factories be able to reduce the amount of cloth sent to the landfill? Is it a matter of ignorance, incompetence, laziness, or?

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In any case, since it appears that the task force has not been able to find a satisfactory vendor for its proposal to ship all the waste fabric off-island, maybe it’s time to re-think the question, and demand that the garment factories assume some responsibility for the burden they have created.

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Then, too, perhaps if the scraps from all 23 factories were not treated as a single commodity, finding a use for a lesser amount might be easier. If the task force were to issue a request for proposal rather than an invitation to bid it might receive some more creative ideas as well.

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There have been many arguments against the idea of giving foreign workers a higher salary and letting them fend for themselves as far as food, housing, medical care, and all the rest is concerned. An argument that has not been widely made is: without barracks, where would they all live? There are thousands of workers now housed in employer-provided barracks. But if those workers were forced to find places to live elsewhere, where would they go?

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The local housing market doesn’t begin to have the type of living accommodations that would suit young, low-income, singles. Even if they got together, and 10 or so rented a house together,

there wouldn't be enough. And such group living could create its own problems, not only within the group, but within the neighborhood.

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The barracks owners could re-rent the rooms back to the workers, but other than offering owners an opportunity to gouge workers, and the likelihood of clogged courts as workers sued the owners for larceny, what would have been gained?

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Before paying workers a higher salary instead of providing them with the benefits they now receive, it might be a good idea to do a study on the impacts such a decision would have.

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Would the tiered wage system be better? It's hard to tell, because all that has been made known about it is that it is practiced in American Samoa. But is that good? or bad? It would be nice to have a little more substantive information than has been provided to date about the government's proposed solution to the controversy over adoption of a minimum wage.

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As I understand it, though, there is already a "tiered" system of sorts in effect here. The garment industry workers are on one tier, domestic workers and farmers another, construction workers another; teachers, doctors, attorneys and other professionals another, and government workers on still another. Each tier operates on a different pay scale. I guess the tiered system would make all that official. But how those differences are determined - by whom, and using what criteria - has not been explained.

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Besides, doesn't it also build in a bias against certain lines of work because of their lower pay levels? Yet a skilled carpenter is as important to one's health and well-being as is a good teacher or a good doctor. After all, without a roof over one's head that withstands typhoons, how can teachers or doctors function?

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In last week's column I expressed concern about the three tigers on island for the Sand Castle show. I have since learned that because the particular kind of tiger is an endangered species, the federal government was involved in bringing the tigers to Saipan, and in monitoring their treatment and condition while they are here.

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In addition, several other specialists, animal rights advocates, and regulatory personnel, some hired by Sand Castle, some the staff of the CNMI's Fish & Wildlife Division, have also been involved in seeing to the care and handling of the big cats. Moreover, while there is no law per se on the books, the Division of Fish and Wildlife has the authority to impose conditions on the importation of non-indigenous species, and has done so, so it would seem that my worry was unfounded.

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Another "column update," as it were: Despite earlier claims by Hon Jun Yoon, new owner of Payless Market, that he was planning to add more food items from the Philippines, Korea, China, and more imported products, Payless' new management is doing very well in its more recent vow to 'continue to stock the food that Americans want to eat.' It is again carrying the not-from-concentrate orange juice in all three styles: pulp-free, some pulp, lots of pulp; Jewish rye bread, yoghurt in both the larger and smaller containers, a large variety of bagels, non-Kellogg (read: less sugar) breakfast cereals, sashimi-sliced fresh tuna, several varieties of Orowheat bread, as well as a great selection of fruits and vegetables.

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According to a friend, the manager said he'd heard that the other store claimed it was going to be the "American" store (let's face it - he probably meant "haole," since all the islanders are American.....) and that he was determined not to let that happen. Isn't it wonderful what competition can do?

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The Coastal Resource Management Offices deserve a great big "Well Done" for the conduct of its recent workshop on CRMO regulations. The whole process was a perfect "text-book" example of how such things should be done. The workshop was widely advertised, and public input was sought - and used - from the very beginning as to its proposed scope and content. At the sessions themselves, rational and manageable goals and objectives for the workshop were clearly stated, and closely observed. There were lots of visual aids, effective handouts, and ample opportunity for open discussion with appropriate members of staff. The topics were substantive, timely, and relevant; the presenters were articulate and well-informed. The sessions were held in a room with comfortable seating, good acoustics, and a supply of refreshments.

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After the workshop was over, a draft report of findings was circulated to the attendees (via e-mail and a sophisticated word-processing format) for their review and comment. And shortly thereafter, the final report was issued, and distributed to all attendees. The result provides a map for CRM as to priorities and the means for achieving them, and for attendees, a record of what transpired and what the CRMO intends to do about their concerns. What more could anyone ask?

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Much of the praise goes to CRMO's Permit Manager Becky Cruz Lizama, who was the chief presenter (as well as organizer) of the workshop. What a dynamo! Her boss, acting director Joaquin D. Salas, is just as deserving of praise for having given her the leeway to put it all together.