

## On My Mind

6/28/02

The brouhaha over attendance at the annual Environmental Protection Agency-sponsored conference in Palau this past week was ridiculous. Some thirty-three people from various government agencies had submitted travel requests; at the last minute, the administration arbitrarily cut that figure in half, despite the fact that some of those denied travel were in fact invited panelists and speakers, despite the fact that most if not all of the travel would be paid for with federal funds.

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No sound reasons were provided for the refusals, "it looks bad in light of our economy" being heard more loudly than any other. The fact that it wasn't going to cost the CNMI government anything because government agencies, who knew of the conference a year in advance, had budgeted the travel into their federal grants, didn't seem to register.

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And then, at the very last possible minute, the administration relented - sort of. It approved a few more of the requests. Which agency was shorted? The Division of Environmental Quality - the agency most directly connected to - and co-sponsor of - the EPA conference. The coconut wireless has it that politics were involved in that decision, which makes it all the more unforgivable.

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Apparently all the panelists and speakers finally were authorized to travel. But Lt. Governor Diego T. Benavente, who is chairman of CNMI's task force on waste management, got it only half right when he noted, in justifying his own attendance, that the sessions on solid waste management would provide panelists with an opportunity to discuss questions of mutual concern and to share methods of coping.

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The conference wasn't meant only for speakers or panelists. It was also meant for those spoken to, the attendees, the support staff. The conference - and many like it - offer opportunities for the exchange of ideas and experience among all staff levels - not only managers and leaders. They offer a chance to meet federal program managers and funders, access to new sources of information and assistance, net-working among peers.

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Denying that opportunity to its employees only hurts the CNMI. How better can staff learn of new tools and new technologies? Where else can they hear experts discuss new methodologies or re-evaluate old ones? How else can they compare notes with colleagues concerning on-going projects? Develop competence in their fields, confidence in their own knowledge? And themselves contribute to the conference by sharing their areas of expertise?

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In a late week "directive," the administration finally acknowledged that federally-funded travel should be exempt from restriction. That's fine as far as it goes, but administration still needs to develop a much more reasoned policy towards off-island travel in general than its present knee-jerk reaction that all off-island travel is bad. Some off-island travel may indeed be a boondoggle. But not all.

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The coconut wireless has it that despite the new directive permitting federally funded travel, CHC's medical director was denied authorization to speak at a U.S. Department of Health ATSDR (Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry) gathering on a problem endemic to tropical islands on the grounds that it served only to enhance the director's reputation. That may be a side effect, but such an invitation also says that the CNMI has a resource that is of value to others, which would have reflected well on the CNMI.

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The main point, however, is that people on that level are professionally obligated to write and present their research findings in order to remain certified in their field. For the administration to deny its professional staff those opportunities is short-sighted as well as counter-productive. When professionals learn that the CNMI does not support such obligations they will no longer be willing to work here. And only those not concerned with maintaining currency in their field will even bother to apply.

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Not so much short-sighted as self-serving is the threat, on the part of the Commonwealth Ports Authority, to do away with the 15-minute grace period now allowed at the sea port to those dropping off or picking up passengers from the Tinian ferry. The CPA is suffering a revenue short-fall, and instead of ascribing it to the general slow-down in the economy and the garment industry, it has decided to again victimize the general public by claiming it's all due to the 15-minute grace period.

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It was bad enough when parking fees were instituted at the airport. It's worse now that security concerns make the timing of picking up passengers at the airport without having to pay to park so difficult. But to take away that 15-minute grace period at the seaport as well?

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Has anyone checked lately whether the CPA really needs that money? Whether it has made any effort to curtail its costs? Whether, by streamlining its operations, and/or reducing its work-force, it wouldn't be able to stay within budget and stop this cycle of ever-higher fees levied against users of its facilities?

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Actually, to be fair and even-handed, the CPA ought to allow a 15-minute grace period at the airport as well.

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There is much emphasis, nowadays on how important it is that everyone know how to read. What one doesn't see so much of, however, is any emphasis on the importance of learning to read - especially newspapers - critically. There is a tendency, particularly in areas where the literacy level is low, to consider everything in print as true, as fact. Things read in newspapers are often accepted at face value - simply because they appear in print.

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But as was clearly shown in conflicting headlines in the CNMI's two papers earlier this week,

discovering the truth requires close scrutiny and careful reading. One paper's headlines said, "Arrivals down 14%." On the same day, the other paper's headlines said, "MVA reports growth in visitor arrivals in May." Obviously, they couldn't both be true - or could they?

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To add to the confusion, the very first sentence in the <I>Variety</I> article, which headlined a decline in visitors, states that "All markets, except Japan, posed a slight growth in tourist arrivals in May." The 14% drop, the article finally explains, is in Japanese tourists when compared to last May's figures. Oh.

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The <I>Variety</I> article goes on to cite substantial increases in Korean, Chinese and U.S. visitors and in visiting ships, when compared to a year ago, but then says that "all islands except Saipan experienced lower arrivals last month" - without making it clear whether meant was lower than last year or lower than the previous month.

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The <I>Tribune</I> article, on the other hand, leads off with the statement that tourist figures improved in May compared to a year ago - even though arrivals from Japan were 14% less than last year's. It provided a pie chart to illustrate not only the percentage of arrivals, but also the size of the increase or decrease from last year. Very illuminating.

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Perhaps the moral of the story here is: never believe headlines. Or never stop at the headlines. (Headlines turn out to be a particular problem because at some papers, the headlines are not prepared by the same people who write the stories.) At any rate, it takes careful reading to distill the truth.....

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It happened a second time this past week when one newspaper ran the headline "Where is Heinz?" on its front page the same day that the other newspaper ran a front page story reporting on statements the speaker had made only the day before. On closer reading, it is not possible to tell when and where the speaker actually made the comments - it could have been in a week-old letter or press release, so he could, indeed, now be "missing." The point here is that not only are headlines mis-leading, but if the articles are not clearly written, even close reading will not clear up the confusion.

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Another former print columnist has taken to the web. This time it's Charlie Reyes, who used to write a column for the <I>Tribune</I>. He is calling it "The Island Libertarian: A weekly column

promoting freedom and free enterprise in the Northern Marianas." The site is decidedly user-friendly, with easily distinguishable click-points, and clear indications of just where to click on them. The column can be found at <a href="http://www.cnmi.net/community/il">www.cnmi.net/community/il</a>.