

On My Mind

6/28/02

The brou-ha 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.

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 budgetted the travel into their federal grants, didn't seem to register.

And then, at the very possible last 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.

Apparently all the panelists, the speakers, finally were authorized to travel. It is still not clear whether all were able to make their connections, given the on-again-off-again games that were played on Capitol Hill. 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.

Yes, this conference promotes sharing of problems and solutions among management and policy level personnel. But the EPA conference is also designed as an educational and training experience for support staff, it allows people in similar work situations to network with their peers elsewhere in Micronesia, and it promotes contact with experts in from the mainland who, in turn, can provide access to additional information and resources.

Perhaps it's because off-island travel is so often abused that all too often requests by government employees to attend off-island functions are rejected out of hand. As is the case with most things, however, it is not a simple question of good or bad. The CNMI is a long way from any place else, other than Guam. It is also a small place, and while becoming more sophisticated, it still does not have all the knowledgeable people and institutional information resources that are readily available elsewhere.

Apparently, the administration has now acknowledged that federally-funded travel 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. Denying that opportunity to its employees only hurts the CNMI. Some off-island travel may indeed be a boondoggle. But some is not.

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Those kids in caps and gowns sure looked cute (see the <I>Variety's</I> Wednesday front page), but mercy me. Caps and gowns for completing Head Start? An expensive ceremony for a group of people who, by definition, are below the poverty line.

Will there be a graduation ceremony from kindergarten to first grade? There's bound to be one from elementary school to junior high, and another from junior high to high school. And then there's graduation from high school. By that time, caps and gowns are old hat, a bore, a ceremony that has already been repeated several times before. Could that be why not everyone sees it as such a big deal?

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There is much emphasis, nowadays, on reading - how important it is to learn to read, how important it is to go on reading, how important it is that everyone know how to read, from pre-schoolers to kids in school to adults. And there are grants available to support all sorts of reading programs at home, at school, in libraries.

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 appeared in print.

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?

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.

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.

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.

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, not even close reading will 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." What would be the letterhead on a page - no doubt there's a different word for the web version - is a lovely scene of an expanse of beach. As Charlie explains in his opening column, "A classic beach scene depicting idyllic peace and tranquility, without excessive Big Government interference into our daily lives, is included in the column's logo, conveying some sort of ideal Libertarian Paradise, which the CNMI could be and should be, with low taxes and maximum personal freedoms intact."

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 <www.cnmi.net/community/il/>.

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Reading newspapers..... Sophisticated readers learn, after a while, that that is not the case. Some, in fact, become downright skeptical of anything that appears in the paper.

medicines. dates on goods. fat content

Taking out Hussein!

Palau - good example of how to do things right. See issues of 6/7-14.....

mediation - no right or wrong means no sides to take.....

Liberation Day - why so long?

Not much less frustrating is the voice mail system at the Bank of Guam. Most of the extensions to which one is referred don't have voice mail boxes, and one is simply told, if it is busy - which it usually is - to call back later. I had a panic attack when I thought I'd lost a check from my checkbook, and

Palau - re gambling - will Remengsau's position hold?

tourism & shoppes in hotels

Bush & Cuba - Trib 5/22 p. 18

\$2 million to DPS, PSS, DPH ok if all islands included - Trib 5/22, p 3 (or 13?)

Canadian doctors have long-term temporary visas to U.S. through NAFTA. Trib 9/6/01, p.7

DPS - gun crimes: locals vs koreans/aliens?

Variety 4/2, p 1

Random notes from the past:

In response to a request for a list of flat rates charged to electrical consumers who are not metered: "There is no such list since the utility performs an assessment of the user's average monthly consumption by counting lights and appliances, by listing the information on the specifications data plates [a form for recording watts, amperes, number of hours, numbers of days, etc.] and determining the average number of hours of usage.

"Of 3339 electrical power users, during April, only 2012 were metered. This means there were 1327 consumers who were on flat rates." <I> June 1983 </I>

re: water usage: "10 years ago when a survey was taken of the water system, 75 percent of the island's homes and businesses were monitored for water usage. Now in 1988 CUC estimates that only 1 in 39 users were metered....Adding to the general chaos of the water system usage is the fact that wells which supply the mains and holding areas with water are also not metered, so no one really knows how much water is actually pumped out of the water lens which is on Saipan." <I>March 1988</I>

It is better now, isn't it?

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PDN reef coverage

consider Dan's paper that CNMI still could claim territory status under UN

A newspaper goodie too good to pass up: In the coverage of the crashed police car: "he added that the accident site in Susupe is the same location where a police officer, years back, ended up being amputated after figuring in an accident." Courtesy the <I>Tribune</I>, 3/12/02, p 4.

From Rachel's Environment and Health News # 737:

Population will grow at rate of 1.1% per year between now and 2020 - resulting in a 23% increase in the total. "This basic trend will impose a 23% greater burden on the natural environment in the next 20 years. Furthermore, **as household size diminishes (requiring more individual homes)** and urban sprawl increases, the burden imposed on the environment by each individual is steadily rising, the OECD says."

ADA and 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

argument that prisoners getting 3 meals a day, better sleeping conditions, etc. is = argument here re alien workers at low wages

do MicSems - esp re settling disputes

I'm ashamed of being American. overthrow of Saddam Hussein of Iraq (we put him there?) openly discussed sans request from locals

comment re lack of kitchen facilities in census report - custom is to cook outdoors.... Trib 2/25, p 3