

On My Mind

8/2/02

Well, well, so the chickens have finally come home to roost, as the saying goes. Which is exactly what House Speaker Heinz S. Hofschneider has been saying all along - the government payroll is bloated, and if it isn't cut, the CNMI is sure to face financial problems. It should not have come as any great surprise, therefore, that government has encountered a cash-flow problem in meeting payroll. It was all but inevitable.

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Yet the "emergency" meeting between the administration and the House earlier this week would seem to indicate that the administration did not see the problem coming, and was caught unprepared. As reported in Wednesday's <I>Variety</I> though, figures provided by House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Stanley T. Torres attest that personnel costs have been higher than budgeted ever since the beginning of this administration. Furthermore, evidence of over-spending - astronomical salaries, new titles for new positions, ever-expanding payrolls - has been obvious to even the most casual observer.

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The Lt. Governor's spin - that as things now stand, "over-spending" is unavoidable - may be true.

At least he's not claiming that the deficit itself was unavoidable.

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But the "spin" that it is the services of the Department of Public Safety and the Commonwealth Health Center that will suffer most from the budgetary shortfall is not true. That's just psychological propaganda. Those agencies may show the biggest deficit - due to their consistent underfunding in the past - but that doesn't necessarily mean it is their services that must be cut as a result. The authority is there to re-program to make sure that essential services continue.

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The Speaker's stance - that the House will not authorize an increase in the deficit unless the administration meets certain conditions - is a welcome display of sanity and restraint. It articulates and expresses an accountability that has long been missing in government. The administration's initial response to the shortfall - that it could intensify efforts to collect receivables, increase use of government-owned facilities for office space, and cut the use of government vehicles - offered only stop-gap measures that neither solve the present dilemma nor address the real problem.

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Earlier promises of accountability on the part of the administration have yet to materialize. Nor has there been any indication that accountability will be forthcoming any time soon. Now, circumstances of its own making have put the administration at the mercy of the House of Representatives and its Speaker. Until and unless the administration begins to demonstrate a real commitment to curbing personnel expenditures, the Speaker should not relent. He should insist that realistic measures, not cosmetic ones, be taken not only to cure present but to curb future excesses of this administration before sanctioning even more government debt.

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The \$75,000 an hour that it has been calculated the government is paying for its employees seems

more than a little obscene. As do salaries of over \$100,000 for government employees - be they judges, doctors, or administrators. The costs of living in the CNMI are far lower than on the mainland, and the argument that to attract competent professionals a comparable salary is required reflects only the inadequacy of recruitment practices and packaging, not reality.

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It is high time that - as the Speaker has urged - the CNMI personnel system be over-hauled, and salaries and benefits not only made more consistent, but also more reasonable. Only by making a determined effort to reduce the size of government - in terms of numbers of employees as well as in terms of payroll dollars - is there any chance of the CNMI living more nearly within its means.

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The alleged money-saving measures initially proposed by the administration - "intensified efforts to collect receivables," using government-owned facilities for office space, and cuts in the use of government vehicles - were weak, inappropriate, and short term. Only the last would perhaps bring immediate savings - the other two take time to implement - by which the new fiscal year would have arrived.

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"Intensified efforts to collect receivables" would probably require the time-consuming practice of advertising for someone to provide collection services, going through the bidding process and negotiating a contract. A better - though long-term - solution would be to make sure that the penalty for not paying receivables was high enough to be an effective motivator to pay on time, and to tighten controls over who is entitled to incur a debt to government to begin with.

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As far as using government-owned facilities for office space is concerned, it continues to seem backward that Saipan's prime real estate - Capitol Hill, with its spectacular views, spacious grounds, and excellent roads and accessible location - should be turned over to government offices rather than used as luxury (leased or rented) residential property. Surely the income from leased or rented high class homes is greater than the savings from not having to pay commercial rent for government offices?

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Lastly, is there any reason why any government official still needs a government car? In Trust Territory days, when more employees earned lower salaries and could not afford cars of their own, perhaps the extensive use of government cars was necessary. But today, when almost every family owns at least one car, wouldn't it be considerably cheaper to pay employees mileage for use of their own car, rather than having the government lease or purchase cars for their use?

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Another cost-benefit analysis that there's no evidence has ever been made is whether it wouldn't be cheaper to provide schooling to the 10 students on Anatahan via satellite rather than to build a school house, and provide a teacher and teacher housing and all the other related amenities on site on Anatahan.

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Northern Marianas College has conducted classes for Tinian and Rota via satellite, so it isn't as though the technology isn't available on island. It should not be difficult, in fact, to find grant money to support such an endeavor, making it that much more cost-effective - a prime consideration given the CNMI's present budgetary woes.

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It's nice to see NMC branching out into all sorts of esoteric areas like wind-surfing and Advanced AV Post-Production. But when will it start offering courses in librarianship and information science? Computer literacy is all well and good, but it is not the same as information literacy. To begin with, each school in the CNMI - and this year there are more than 20 - should have a certified school librarian. That requires courses - at a BA level - in school librarianship. Then there's the college library, and the public libraries - which are consistently under-staffed - for which a Master's degree in librarianship is required.

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The need for professionally-trained librarians is obvious, but in order to qualify, it is necessary to go to Hawaii or the mainland for training. There is no library training program at NMC, nor is there one on Guam. NMC now facilitates training for the professions of law and medicine. It has long since trained teachers. Surely it's about time NMC started offering courses in librarianship to island residents?

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Thought for the day (from an old Ann Landers column): Life is peculiar. It waits until we flunk the course, and then it teaches us the lesson.