

On My Mind  
10/25/02

Today's headline in the <I>Variety</I> forecasts payless paydays - possibly as soon as next month, according to the details that follow. No one can say they didn't see it coming. The delay in payment of tax refunds and rebates, the apparently unsuccessful search for money to bail out the Retirement Fund's contract with the government's third party health care administrator, the increasing curtailments of government travel, purchases, car leases, etc., all gave clear evidence of the coming problem.

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The belated moves on the part of the legislature and the administration to strengthen collection of receivables and to ensure full payment of gross revenue and excise taxes may turn out to be too little too late. For instance, the newly-passed law requiring accountability in sales receipts appears to need the promulgation of regulations before it can be implemented. (Needed, for example, is a definition of the minimum sale for which a receipt is required. Does a single can of soda require one? A single candy bar?) Even emergency regulations take time to prepare....

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A letter to the editor in Wednesday's issue of the <I>Variety</I> suggests some a far more immediate and creative way of stretching what little cash flow still exists. Writer Bill Concepcion suggests that bi-weekly payrolls could consist of a combination of checks and what he refers to as "redeemable IOUs" - either money to be paid at some future date, or additional leave time. The plan, he proposes, would be applicable only to elected officials and to government employees earning more than \$40,000.

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Given the incredibly inflated salaries of some government employees (whether from double-dipping or exorbitant salary levels, or other sweetheart deals) as well as the incredibly inflated retirement benefits of some former government employees, the plan should go even further, and set a cap on the amount of salary for which IOU's would be paid. For example, if everyone received 70% of their salary in checks and the rest in IOU's, those earning over \$70,000, for example, would get redeemable IOU's only up to a value of \$70,000.

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After all, they have been living off the fat of the land, so to speak, and when there is no more fat, they too should be required to tighten their belts and sport a less profligate life style. Setting a cap to reimbursement would also avoid the government's incurring yet another outsized unfunded liability.

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Whatever the mechanism, the idea of continuing to pay salary but at lower levels - with a floor below which cuts would not be made - would be far less disruptive to the economy in general, and to the individual wage-earners in particular than a failure to issue any paychecks at all. The inclusion of IOU's in the plan should keep it from being flagrantly illegal. And if the plan were applied fairly and equitably, one could hope that people would be willing to accept the cuts as better than not getting any paycheck at all.

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Concepcion's main thrust was payment of refunds and rebates. But it would seem the more pressing need is to find a way of paying salaries. Unless someone up there on Capitol Hill can

come up with something better, Concepcion's idea should be pursued - diligently and speedily - if apparent disaster is to be avoided.

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The governor's promise of transparency in government has turned even more farcical with the announcement, earlier this week, that there will be a news blackout regarding the 40 Egyptians brought in to work on the prison project until an investigation has been completed. Sounds like someone was afraid the governor was going to put his foot in his mouth again, and the only way to prevent it would be by imposing a blackout, so he'd have an excuse for not saying anything.

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The governor's knee-jerk reaction to the presence of the Egyptians in the CNMI - that all 40 should be immediately deported - is about as simplistic a notion as I've ever heard. 40 people - fathers, sons, husbands - and Christian Coptics at that - have come all the way from Egypt to the CNMI under contract to work on construction of the CNMI prison, and what is the governor's reaction? In effect, fire them. Send them back home. Why? For what?

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For once, I have to agree with attorney Bob O'Connor. These men have done nothing wrong. Neither, apparently, has their contractor. He followed the law. There is, it appears, nothing on the books to prohibit Egyptians from coming to the CNMI. Yes, they are from the Middle East, home of Muslim terrorists. But these men are not even Muslims. They are Christians. (That is not to engage in discrimination, or profiling. Not all Egyptian Muslims are terrorists, by any means. But so far as is known, no middle-eastern Christian are terrorists.)

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The CNMI, under the Covenant, is authorized to control its own immigration. Unless clear and unequivocal criminal violations have occurred, we need not apologize to anyone for following the laws of the CNMI. It would appear that, instead, the governor was too quick to cave in under 'expressions of concern' from federal officials.

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First came the denial that the Egyptians were even in the CNMI. Then came the apology for the "misinformation." And the statement that they would be deported immediately. And then the blackout. How embarrassing can it get? Maybe that's why it's been announced that now at long last - some six months after the resignation of the first one - the governor is about to hire another press secretary? In hopes that speaking through a press secretary will protect him from such boners in the future?

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Let's hope that the Emergency Management Office doesn't pull another boner in dealing with unexploded ordinance in Rota's waters. The last effort resulted in extensive destruction to a section of Rota's coral reefs that had been a major underwater attraction for snorkellers and scuba divers.

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Isn't it a little absurd to insist that ordinance that has lain harmlessly underwater for 50 years has now become so dangerous as to justify extensive reef damage? Please, EMO, leave it alone?

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Another problem area where some innovative thinking is desperately needed is in regard to homestead rights. The Marianas Public Land Authority has rightly imposed a moratorium on Saipan's homestead program, since, according to the MPLA Commissioner, MPLA is running out of a supply of public land.

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At a recent meeting with members of the House Committee on Natural Resources as reported in today's <I>Tribune</I>, the committee chairman could only say, after hearing of the problems, that it looked like MPLA was working on the problem, "but right now [the effort] is hitting walls." Could it be, sir, that that's because no one is looking outside the box?

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Among the difficult issues the CNMI must resolve as it matures is the fate of the homestead program. (Another is the rationalization of its overly-generous retirement program.) At some time the homestead program must come to an end. Now that the problem has been recognized, it's high time more attention was paid to how to do so, rather than on how to perpetuate it.

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Without having read Senate Local Bill 13-11, I would hesitate to support it without reservation, but from what was reported as its purpose (see the 10/24 issue of the <I>Variety</I>, page 5) it appears to have merit. Senate Local Bill proposes to ban the export of a plant known as "medicinal noni" except as handled through local growers. The plant is apparently being processed and sold as medicine outside Rota - presumably without adequate recompense to local owners.

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The exploitation of indigenous plants of medicinal value by major drug companies is an all-too familiar story in the Pacific. The drug companies pay a pittance to the owners of the property where the plants are found, and then make millions for themselves in packaging and selling the plant products on the open market.

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Legislators might well want to take a look at other medicinal plants still to be found in the CNMI, and take steps to ensure that whatever profit is derived from their sale is shared with the people of the CNMI. They are indigenous plants. As such, they can be said to constitute a natural resource, the use of which should benefit the indigenous people.