

On My Mind

1/17/03

The governor's agreeing to voluntarily give up ½ hour of pay a day as his contribution towards trying to improve the CNMI's economy would almost be funny if it weren't so appalling, embarrassing, shameful, mindless, shocking, stupid, disappointing, inadequate, ineffective, downright silly. Crises - such as the fiscal crisis the CNMI government currently faces - call for strong leadership, creativity, courage, decisive action.

None of which are reflected in the governor's ill-considered attempt to under-cut House efforts to legislate a cut in work hours by halving the number of hours to be cut and making it voluntary, rather than working with the Legislature on its more reasonable proposal to cut a full hour from each work day and to make it mandatory. Strong leadership promotes team work and cooperation with colleagues, rather than co-opting them.

Moreover, asking government employees to please take a voluntarily cut in pay - even if, belatedly, the governor himself also agrees to take a pay-cut - is hardly the stuff of inspirational leadership. Rather, it is not only weak, but ineffectual. In the first place, the very idea of volunteerism, in this instance, is totally unrealistic. Very few people are willing to voluntarily tighten their belts when the benefit is so intangible and abstract. It's not as though people were being asked to sacrifice to help disaster victims, or to build a new church - to meet an immediate need, to fund a tangible outcome.

Those who've raised objections to the idea of voluntarily taking a pay cut are quite right: they should not be asked to do so unless everyone else does it as well.

In the second place, what kind of message does it send when the governor, one of the highest paid people in the CNMI, offers to "sacrifice" all of ½ hour of pay per day? With all the benefits, and other funds available to the governor's office, the loss of that ½ hour of pay will hardly be noticed. For "normal" wage earners, who do not have such benefits, losing ½ hour of pay will be much more painful. What's more, a ½-hour pay cut is HALF of what the legislators had envisioned all government employees should be asked to do - their suggestion was that employees only get paid for a seven-hour work day, or 35-hour work week, whereas the governor is suggesting a 37 ½-hour work week.

What kind of weak-kneed leadership is that? C'mon, governor! Be assertive. Be strong. Be sensible. Propose something meaningful. Support House Bill 13-242. And if you were really interested in displaying leadership, you could even propose that employees earning over \$70,000 give up two hours pay a day, while those earning below \$25,000 not give up any.

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Now it is being proposed that there be no paid holidays, that there be a parking charge at the Commonwealth Health Center, that additional fees be charged to visiting ships - all of which sound like grasping at straws in the wind. How much will NO paid holidays save? Is it even

legal to deny pay for holidays? Isn't that in people's contracts, in government regulations? Paying to park at CHC? Maybe it would be ok to ask visitors to pay for parking, but patients? Trying to meet medical and medicinal charges are enough of a hardship for many people here. To add to their burden seems heartless indeed! And charging extra fees to visiting ships? Isn't that counterproductive?

Simultaneously comes the news that the governor is going to reorganize government, AGAIN. Towards what ends? Initially, it will only add costs to government as new stationery, new forms and new business cards are required. No doubt there will be shuffles in personnel, perhaps in office configurations, etc., etc. Will this save money? How much?

Where is the cost-benefit analysis? Where is the prioritization? Where is the logic in all of this?

There is motion for the sake of motion, it seems, without any sign of reason, sense or order. On the other hand, Congressman Stanley T. Torres' proposals to do away with all government vehicles and all cell phones seem far more rational, more certain money-savers.

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Hopefully, by now Don Farrell has learned the answer to his question in last Sunday's <I>Tribune</I> - why hasn't anyone pursued developing Pagan's pozzolan deposit before. But for others who might still be wondering, it isn't a case of the Marianas Public Land Authority dragging its heels, as Farrell claims. The idea of mining Pagan's ash re-surfaces about every five years or so. A naive new developer comes along, making elaborate plans for mining and marketing the stuff, and getting everyone all excited about the great profits to be earned.

But reality eventually sets in as it becomes clear that there is no good harbor there, only a very short landing strip and an active volcano, so getting people and supplies to the island will be complicated and expensive. Nor is there any infrastructure in place - no roads, no useable buildings, no power plant, no water system, no waste water system, no phone lines. No school, church, store, gas station, post office.

The expense - and the logistics - are pretty inhibiting.

In addition, there are historic artifacts and a black sand beach and problems with feral animals, so other agencies than MPLA - the Historic Preservation Office, the Coastal Resource Management Office, the Division of Environmental Quality, the Office of Fish and Wildlife, the Emergency Management Office - also have a role to play in what happens on Pagan and how and where.

There's also the concern that parts, if not all, of Pagan could end up looking like the stripped hills of Nauru.

In short, it's not a question of MPLA's dragging its feet, or calling for an oversight hearing. It's a question of economics: will the profit expected to be earned really be enough to cover the enormous costs involved? So far, the answer seems to be "no."

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Yesterday's <I>Variety</I> carried a column from the <i>Washington Post </i>, written by a Washington, D.C. think-tank co-director, that criticizes the American press for the twisted view of the current turmoil in Venezuela it has given the public.

According to Mark Weisbrot, the entire country is not in chaos, the majority of the people do not want their president Hugo Chavez ousted, and only the oil industry, rather than labor at large, is on strike, contrary to the reports being issued by the U.S. media. Nor do U.S. media reports reflect the fact that Chavez' government is "probably one of the least repressive in Latin America."

Weisbrot writes that the warped stories carried by the press are the result of U.S. oil interests, which want a larger share of the oil industry profits. He says that the U.S., in fact, has supported ouster attempts by the military, and also supports the oil monopoly's goals of "increasing oil production, busting OPEC quotas, and selling off the company to foreign investors," all of which would benefit only Venezuela's small rich upper class.

The column (and kudos to the <I>Variety</I> editor's discerning eye for publishing it) proves once again that one cannot believe everything carried in the media, that one cannot afford to limit one's self to a single source of news, and that the U.S.'s foreign policy leaves much to be desired.