

On My Mind

5/2/03

In September of last year, when 11 staff were told their services were no longer required, the president of Northern Marianas College explained that the changes were a result of reorganization of staff - presumably for the purpose of greater economy and effectiveness. Though many words were offered about re-alignment of responsibilities and functionality and such, there was little concrete information as to just what the changes in staffing pattern were expected to accomplish, or how.

According to media reports, subsequently several more changes were made in the staffing structure of the college. In addition, the president has promised changes in financial management as a result of recent audit shortcomings.

In his state of the college report given last week, the president again talks of change. There will be significant changes, he said, in academic standards for both students and faculty. They will be based on a thorough review of standards "from top to bottom" and a systematic assessment of outcomes, among other things. Program improvements were also promised. In making those changes, the college will focus on what is learned, and not how it is taught, the president said.

Presumably, change is also expected to come as a result of a "Future Search" project the president has launched. According to press reports, 64 people selected from the community will be asked to help lay the groundwork for the development of a strategic plan for the college through a series of group discussions. Topics will range from the general "what's the role of a education in society" to academic standards to specific program offerings. The output of "Future Search" will be combined with something called the Community Human Resources Development Program, recently completed by the college.

So far, the "sea of changes" at NMC promised and promoted by its president don't seem to have any purpose, or direction. No framework has been established - or is visible - within which those changes are to take place. There is no statement of purpose, no identification of goals, no list of objectives that the myriad of changes are supposed to satisfy. There is not even a hint of what kind of changes are under consideration.

Nor is there any indication of who will bring about those changes, or how those changes will be brought about - or within what time frame. Even the more basic question of why change is necessary is only vaguely answered.

All we are being told, repeatedly, is that change is needed, and therefore, that changes will be made. Lots and lots of verbiage - all vague, all general, all non-descriptive. Change can be exhilarating, dynamic, productive. But making changes just for the sake of change doesn't accomplish a thing. Without a clearer picture of the who, what, when, where, why and how, the whole exercise seems pretty pointless.

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One landmark that NMC's president has identified in the "sea of change" forecast for the college is the so-called Pacific Gateway project. In fact, the project is apparently intended to serve as the anchor to everything else that is to occur at the college. Targetting an initial annual enrollment of 470 students - the break-even point, according to the president - by 2004, the Gateway project will offer courses in English to foreign students.

To start the program, however, the president - and the Board - have determined that they will need \$10,000,000. That's \$2 million for land, \$3.5 million for the purchase of facilities, and \$5 million for renovation and for changing it into a college setting. Not included in the \$10 million figure, it would appear, are funds for staff, faculty or support resources. NMC is asking the Legislature and the governor for their approval and endorsement and to help it obtain funds.

While it may sound good on paper, in actuality this proposal would appear to have no more solid a foundation than the rest of the sea of changes. The beginning of the 2004 academic year is just a little over a year away. Between now and then, NMC would have to acquire the funds, find a site, negotiate with the landholder for the property, develop design plans for the renovation into a college setting, contract out the renovations, complete the reconstruction, recruit not only the 470 students, but enough faculty to teach them, identify and acquire all the educational and resource materials required, to mention just some of the more obvious tasks. Should the project wish to be credentialed by an accreditation agency of some sort, time to achieve that would also have to be factored in.

It's not likely that all of that will happen within the projected time frame.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that a full enrollment of 470 students (from SARS-free areas) will be found by next fall - especially for a newly established school that has not yet acquired either a reputation or credentials of any sort. Ordinarily, new schools start more modestly, and expand only as demand increases. Every private school in the CNMI reflects this pattern. To build a plant of the magnitude envisioned with nothing more than a hope that so many students will appear the very first year is sheer folly.

And if no changes or improvements can take place at NMC until the Gateway Project begins to generate the revenue to underwrite them, the prospect for improvement at NMI any time in the near future doesn't look all that promising either.

The "carrot" has been held out that with 8,000 students by 2009, the program would generate \$117 million in annual revenue, the equivalent of each student generating \$14,625 in revenue. Promising as that may sound, that too is far-fetched, unrealistic. So huge an increase over such a short period of time - particularly in a setting such as the CNMI - just isn't plausible.

The governor and the legislature, who've both said they support the Gateway project, had better take a closer look. NMC's president may be glib - that is, a smooth talker - but when it comes to offering anything that is tangible, practical, solidly-based and properly documented, it would appear that he is either unable or unwilling to do so.

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Almost as unrealistic and glib was the governor, yesterday, in telling his audience in his "State of the Commonwealth" speech that the state of the CNMI economy was "strong." Almost every issue of the local daily paper brings more news of on-going financial crises in the CNMI - the stories of businesses closing, of empty buildings, of sales declines are constant. Many agencies suffer from a shortage of personnel due to lack of funding. There is not enough funding to finish construction of the prison, there is no money to pay health care providers, there is no money to keep the Retirement Fund functioning, nor is there any no prospect of finding enough money to meet those large and growing debts anytime soon.

The <I>Saipan Tribune</I> has revamped its web site, and what a change! It's now possible to search back issues of the paper - even with only a word or two - and it works like a charm! Congratulations!

kudos to trib on new web page and searchable archives - super!
comment on homesteads

Has ever a war ended more ignominiously? Bush took one right off the shelf - never plan ahead/wage a war with NO plan for its ending. They bomb Hussein, but don't know if they even have DNA so they can prove it if they're successful. Are there any stories of U.S. combing the wreckage for traces? Coverage, sans networks to summarize, leave a huge gap in coverage. The looting - epecially of the museum - is outrageous. What was George thinking of????? Where were all his planners? All his senior experts?????????????

I believe that the risk of a direct terrorist attack of any kind in or on the CNMI is practically non-existent, I'd agree that there probably is a need to prepare for the indirect effect of attacks that could occur elsewhere. For example, if a world-wide fuel shortage occurs, is the CNMI ready? Should Shell and Mobil be asked to build extra storage tanks? Should steps be taken to make sure the tanks we have are always full?

What if air cargo shipping is disrupted? Does the CNMI have any fall-back position for alternate sources for such goods?

What if certain shipping lanes are closed? Does the CNMI have any fall-back position for obtaining shipped items from other sources? Here, too, would it make sense to arrange for more extensive storage facilities? Should stores be subsidized to hold bigger inventories?

What if tourism rates fell even further than they have in the past - due not so much to any danger in the CNMI, but to circumstances elsewhere? If this were to occur in combination with, or separately from, a more severe decline in garment factory production, the effect on the people of the CNMI could be severe. Does the CNMI have any fall-back plans for providing basic necessities such as housing, food and clothing to a large mass of unemployed?

From the sounds of it, the office of homeland security is focussing on direct attacks on the CNMI, without much, if any, consideration being given to the effect on the CNMI of attacks elsewhere.

Given the CNMI's configuration - small isolated islands - and its dependence on imported goods, it might be prudent for that office to give serious thought, as well, to the problems that would occur if the lines of supply to the islands - as well as its sources of revenue - were significantly disrupted for unpredictable lengths of time.

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It has been over a year since/ speed with which GovGuam has cut expenditures.....

mic sems

War effort on Saipan

CPA again?

Guam cost cutting

A cost-cutting proposal introduced in the House would set a limit on the number of years a person could work for the government before being forced to retire. (Trib, 2/11)

remittances, and aliens owning businesses 1/20-22

If it weren't so damnably frightening, it would make quite a parlor game to try to guess which world-wide target would best suit the terrorist's search for a site - as homeland security agents have defined it - that would harm the greatest number of people, inflict the greatest economic damage, destroy a significant monument/landmark, and leave the biggest emotional scar. As I said last year, I am glad I live on this remote and relatively little-known island!

But even here we are not immune. All the trappings of increased airport security and the like have also been imposed here, adding to the complexity and cost of government - as it has everywhere else.]

So - let us hope that the many worldwide protests against war will grow, until the world's leaders are forced to acknowledge and accept what so many of us already do: that war only kills, it does not solve the problems.

More incomplete news stories:

It's not clear whether the fault is DEQ's or the press,' but notices of beach area pollution and warnings to stay away for hours aren't worth much without knowing when the tests took place.

classes on tourism include litter, safety from robbery.....

Palau proposal to ban imported handicrafts Trib 8/1, p 13

Puerto Rico comparison

praise Torres!

From Rachel's Environment and Health News # 737:

medicines. dates on goods. fat content

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.....

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

tourism & shoppes in hotels

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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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

ADA and 2nd floor