

On My Mind

8/01/03

Back on real time....I've not yet caught up with all the news - though I did make use of the newspapers on-line as well as Bruce Lloyd's headline service - so don't feel ready to tackle the big stories yet, lest I err, and embarrass myself. For today, then, some of the less complex issues.

Math is not my favorite subject, and I'm not very good at it, so I try to avoid writing about numbers. But some that have popped up lately seem straightforward enough, yet sufficiently puzzling that not mentioning them would be a disservice to all concerned. First, I think, was the \$3.5 million offered by the Governor to NMC President Wright for his "Gateway" scheme. Next came the \$1 million offered by the Governor to the Public School System for teacher salaries. Then came the "\$100,000-\$200,000 (read \$500,000 before they're all through) the Governor has contributed for the appearance of an NMI float in a parade in California. Now comes his astounding offer to "co-share" the \$275 million cost of establishing a CNMI National Guard.

Of course, there's been no clue as to what "co-share" means in this context, but let's say it's 10% (surely he can't mean 50%????). That would make the CNMI's share \$27.5 million. Which then gives us - if my math is correct - \$33.5 million that the Governor has managed to dredge up from somewhere over the last few months for items not included in anyone's budget. It's not as though the economy has suddenly recuperated, as though the poker machine returns and the sin taxes and garment factory revenue have suddenly generated a great surplus. So where is all this money coming from? If such sums are available, why aren't they included in the budget?

During the same period, not only the Public School System, but also CHC and DPS - to the detriment of the community - are experiencing great difficulties in meeting their responsibilities. Special Education teachers are having to buy classroom materials out of their own pocket, or make them themselves due to a lack of funds for teaching supplies. Southern High School doesn't have enough classrooms to offer a balanced curriculum, or adequate facilities for physical education. (One wonders how and why a brand-new school could legitimately come up short of either.) CHC is losing emergency room doctors, in part, because of inadequate leave policies. DPS faces an on-going struggle to keep enforcement efforts at an acceptable level.

That \$33.5 million the Governor seems to have pulled out of a hat could certainly go a long way toward meeting those shortfalls, and probably a myriad of others, too.

For an administration that vowed to be transparent, that promised fiscal responsibility, that claimed it had its priorities straight, its behavior - as reflected in the pattern above - sure seems contradictory, not to mention counter-productive.

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Tinian Municipal Council's recent actions, on the other hand, are quite the opposite. Council members identified a need for a skate park, and worked together to plan, design, fund and construct the CNMI's first public skate park. A boon for the community, and fully in keeping with

the responsibilities of municipal councils, the skate park is scheduled to open this week-end.

Council members seem to have done a thorough job of planning - free training sessions, as well as safety equipment will be provided; to use the park, youth will be required to obtain a Youth Center ID card. Both in-line skating and skate-boarding can be accommodated.

The benefits of the park have been described mainly in terms of advantages for local youth but I think it will, in all likelihood, also appeal to the young at heart among tourists, not to mention other local residents. There is even potential for growth, if a skate-rental facility were eventually added, and a snack bar.....and it could even be used in rainy weather - if they put a pala-pala-type roof over it.

Let's hope Saipan follows suit - the sooner the better. In the meantime, CONGRATULATIONS to the Tinian Municipal Council!!!

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I wish I could also give unqualified congratulations to Northern Mariana College's Cooperative Research, Extension, and Education Service for the \$90,984 grant it recently received from an organization called "Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education," which is based at Utah State University. The grant will be used to assess commercial uses for traditional and medicinal plants in the Pacific.

That could provide a boon to the developing countries of the Pacific (and here, I include the CNMI), who have, for too long, been victimized by entrepreneurs who take the profits derived from local medicines with them, rather than seeing to it that the countries from which the medicinal plants were taken get their share.

There is nothing in the description of the grant to CREES as reported in the press to indicate how the assessment will deal with this problem. The web-site provided in the article provided no clue. And no one was available at CREES at press time to provide any information.

So we'll have to leave it a qualified congratulations, and trust that if protection wasn't included for the "owners" of the medicinal plants, it now will be.

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In an all-too self-serving fashion, KCNM/KZMI Manager Harry Blalock let someone else speak for him when it comes to criticizing members of the media. In his weekly "Food for Thought" comments on July 18, he leaves it to long quotes from Bruce Lloyd's personalized comments on headlines to ask how come no one has come to Blalock's defense in his feud with the Governor.

The entire commentary deals with Blalock's problems in accessing government sources of information, and with his detractors, who claim, among other things, that his coverage is biased and one-sided. How this one said this and that one said that, and how he was able to identify the

letter writer - who didn't, after all, really hide his name - who suggested that Blalock was not following the precepts of ethical journalism.

Blalock ends this particular commentary by asking, "how did I wind up being a focus of a letter to the editor anyway? I'm nobody important, just a reporter with a few questions."

Well, if Blalock doesn't know, I don't know that anyone can help him. But I did want the record to show that this journalist has been silent because she has been embarrassed by the tone and the content of his commentaries. I feel they are unprofessional, inappropriate, undignified, unworthy of the label of responsible, ethical journalism.

The questions are rude, redundant, repetitive. The attitude is abrasive, strident. The exhortations are self-serving. Moreover, the alleged lack of access to information is self-inflicted. - Blalock has certainly been on island long enough to have observed what constitutes acceptable patterns of interaction. That he has chosen to interact differently is, of course, his prerogative. But he has no one to blame but himself for the dilemma he faces as a result. Which doesn't leave much of a reason to come to his defense.

He may, as some have said, be asking the questions others feel afraid to ask. But that doesn't necessarily make him a praiseworthy journalist.