

On My Mind  
8/15/03

I sure wish I were a millionaire! (Don't we all?) But I have a particular purpose for my million. I would buy at least one of the four remaining public land beach front properties on Saipan that, according to a recent report in the <I>Variety</I>, is not, at the moment, under lease to anyone. And then I would turn it into a public park.

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Every major public beach area on the Saipan lagoon - except for one in San Antonio, one in Garapan, one in San Isidro, and one in Paupau - has been leased to a major hotel. Those beaches are now effectively closed to anyone except hotel guests, leaving local residents - or anyone else not staying at a beach-front hotel - only narrow strips of beach along Beach Road, or in American Memorial Park for their use.

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These "disenfranchised" deserve a spot of their own on Saipan's famed lagoon - a spot where they too can take pleasure in the "sea, sand and surf" the CNMI sells to tourists. And now is an ideal time to make it happen. As Marianas Public Land Authority Commissioner Henry Hofschneider said, in the <I>Variety</I> story, the price of such land is at an all-time low.

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Maybe it wouldn't even take a million dollars?

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A million dollars. Would it take that much to install water meters at every water user's place (private or commercial) on Saipan? I don't think so! But whatever it takes, wouldn't that be a much simpler solution to the water shortage problem on our island than the drilling of more wells, or trying to build a de-salination plant, or hiring yet another consultant? It's established fact that millions of gallons of water a day that are pumped from Saipan's water wells do not reach their destination, are lost somewhere in the distribution system. With water meters, it would be easy to see just where that water was, or was not, going.

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The objection has been raised that water meters do not work if there is not 24-hour water, that erratic water flows cause the meters to flow backwards. It is difficult to believe that there is no solution to what is, after all, but a fairly simple technical problem. Do we not have the experts that know how to find such meters?

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How much of that million dollars would it take to build water catchment systems for every residence? (remember, I have no head for figures.) Isn't that, again, a simpler solution to the problem of water shortages on island? With all the rain that's been falling, few people would need to tap into "city" water - if they had adequate water catchment systems.

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There wouldn't be a need to over-pump - or to over-drill for more wells - if conservation measures like meters to curb water waste, and catchment systems to lower water consumption were in place. Another conservation measure is the use of low-water-use toilets. Some utility systems, have subsidized replacing customers' toilets as a means of cutting water consumption.

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Yes, there's more to an effective water system than conservation at the user end. But conservation at the user end plays an important role in the whole picture, and from the evidence, it would appear that neither the water task force, nor CUC, nor anyone else involved, is making any effort to make sure it is also included.

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It seems a typical pattern - not holding individual people accountable, while throwing money away on more arcane solutions.

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In response to the suggestion in last week's column that mandatory negotiation be imposed on legislators if they do not pass a budget within a the first quarter, a reader wrote to say that that did not go far enough. What would work better, he said, would be to impose a cut in pay if legislators could not do their job and pass a budget on time. As he said, "In order to get someone's attention you need to either hit them over the head (not very nice or even legal) or reach into their pockets and take money. Now that will get their attention.

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"If you want them to pass a budget then set a deadline. If they miss the deadline then all of their compensation (salary, expenses, etc) goes into an escrow account. They get that money when they do their job. You would have a budget in 5 nano seconds."

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The problem is how to put such a mechanism in place. Obviously, the legislators themselves would never pass a law jeopardizing their own pay.

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In Guam, the suggestion has been made that an outside "reorganization czar" be brought in as hitman to downsize its government so that legislators and the administration don't have to get involved in personnel issues and, will, therefore, presumably, focus on their primary responsibilities.

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In California, people unhappy with the handling of the government budget have successfully petitioned to conduct a vote on the recall of the governor. In some foreign countries, people resort to more violent action to express their unhappiness with their government's performance.

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In other words, there doesn't seem to be any easy way to persuade - or force! - legislators, once they are in office, to perform responsibly. If they themselves do not set priorities and deadlines and controls, then, thanks to the "separation of power" doctrine, there will be no priorities, deadlines, controls.

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And we all lose.

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Hope springs eternal, however, and already, while the 13<sup>th</sup> Legislature is being written off, attention is beginning to focus on the next crop of aspiring legislators. While any number of incum-

bents are running for re-election, the presumption appears to be that with the right mix, even they can become more accountable.

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In hopes that more complete knowledge will bring informed action on the part of voters, several forces are joining together to collect and disseminate vital information about each of the candidates for office in the November election. The project is in its early stages, with the schedule calling for information to be collected in September, and disseminated in October. Information will also be gathered and disseminated on the various initiatives that will be on the November ballot.

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Once the information has been disseminated, it will be up to the voters to decide what to make of it. They can disregard it, and vote according to family, party and dollar loyalty, or they can use it to make informed decisions about which candidate shows the most promise of becoming an accountable and responsible legislator.

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Will the 14<sup>th</sup> Legislature be any different from the 13<sup>th</sup>? Only time will tell. The state of the Commonwealth, when all is said and done, depends on how responsibly each voter casts his or her ballot.