

On My Mind

9/12/03

At the risk of alienating any number of people, I must say that I am inclined to agree with those who spoke up at meeting at the Garapan Elementary School earlier this week on the "revitalization" of Garapan: developing a pedestrian mall for tourists is all very well, but shouldn't solving Garapan's water shortage come first?

The pedestrian mall, a centerpiece of the "revitalization," is designed to enhance the shopping experience of the tourist. That is all fine and good. But at the expense of local residents?

That is not so good. The \$6 million that has been slated to go towards the "revitalization" of Garapan could go a long way towards providing more than the short time (sometimes less than an hour, according to one speaker at the hearing) those residents - and those with businesses in the area - have access to the public water supply.

That \$6 million investment in "revitalizing" Garapan is, after all, a gamble. Tourist traffic is still at the low end of the scale. Will there eventually be enough tourists to have made that investment worthwhile? When? How long will it take to recoup that investment? Isn't it more important, and perhaps, even a better investment, to provide water to local residents and local businesses? The shops and restaurants are already in place, and available to tourists. Is a face-lifting for the shops really more important than water for the people?

In the meantime, the least the government could do would be to help local residents - and businesses - install rain water catchments. Not only would that reduce stormwater run-offs, but it would also ease the demand on the public water supply.

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People are saying the political future of former House Speaker Diego T. Benavente, now Lieutenant Governor, is in trouble as a consequence of the dismal performance of his running mate and now governor. Benavente should distance himself from the governor, those people say. Well, that's a little hard to do, under the circumstances. After all, he does have to fill the governor's shoes when the governor is off-island.

On the other hand, Benavente's presence at that Garapan "revitalization" public hearing earlier this week offered a very positive image of just how good a leader he is. Benavente was acting governor at the time, yet he not only attended the hearing, but stayed to the very end. I don't think I've ever seen a governor do that before.

Presumably, Benavente was there, in large part, to speak for the Water Task Force which he chairs. Given that water was not the topic of the hearing, and therefore his presence wasn't required, the fact that he was there at all is worth noting. And when water issues did arise, he was ready with appropriate responses. Admittedly, at one point, he did start to wrangle with a member of the audience in the process, but he seemed to realize pretty quickly that it was better to let the member vent, than to try reason with him.

An earlier appearance at a hearing in late August on the Drinking Water Infrastructure Grant Program also reflected well on Benavente. Unfortunately, outside of government staff, there was no audience to speak of at the hearing, but Benavente stayed and spent time informally answering questions on a one-on-one basis from yours truly, who did attend.

On both occasions, by appearing at all (and unlike the governor, on time at that), by being knowledgeable and articulate, by remaining afterwards to listen to the concerns of those in attendance, Benavente showed himself to be accessible, concerned and informed. On his own, out from under the shadow of the governor, Diego T. Benavente continues to display all of the qualities and characteristics that got him elected in the first place.

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On the subject of appropriate uses of money, it has been proposed to use the money originally appropriated for building a school on Anatahan for the building of a school on Pagan instead. Has anyone done any cost-benefit studies on the idea? Compared the cost and feasibility of formal public schooling with the cost of underwriting home-study programs? Looked into the feasibility of providing satellite-based distance education programming instead of full-time teachers?

The cost of building a school, providing it with power and water, and providing teachers and materials to any of the Northern Islands - especially when everything must be transported from here to there - is quite steep. There is no doubt the CNMI would be forced to pay a far higher per pupil education cost for those students than it now pays as per pupil cost for the education of any student in the "lower" islands.

The Northern Islands are different from Rota, Tinian, Saipan. They do not have infrastructure in place. They have few, if any, permanent residents. They are, simply put, undeveloped. It makes no sense to blindly copy, for the Northern Islands, patterns that are in place here. The circumstances are different, and demand different solutions. There is no reason why parents can't be trained to become home-study mentors for the school-age students who might move to Pagan, for example. Home-study is a proven technique that has become increasingly accepted as a valid alternative to public school.

Education is important, and the intent here is not to deprive anyone moving to the Northern Islands of access to education. Ordinarily, people move from one area to the other to take advantage of good schools. Those who move away from existing schools should bear some responsibility for compensating for the absence thereof.

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While on the subject of education, I find it amusing that Northern Marianas College is applying to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for an \$8 million loan for the purpose of creating, managing, and operating a program designed to teach English to foreign students. Just how that

relates to agriculture is anyone's guess.

Also beyond me is how NMC expects to be able to repay the loan and, presumably at the same time, to upgrade faculty salaries, lower student tuition costs, and generally enhance the college and its offerings - all from the tuition it expects foreign students to pay.

The numbers keep getting muddier and muddier. And the stories keep getting fuzzier and fuzzier. How NMC's president managed to hornswoggle both the governor and Interior's rep is beyond me. Perhaps that says as much about the victims as it does about the perpetrator?

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It would be nice if one could criticize such government actions as deserve it by claiming that they constitute mis-spending, or wasting, of the taxpayer's dollar. It would enable one to make a much stronger argument. But the fact is that here in the CNMI, that argument isn't very persuasive because it is, in large part, not the CNMI tax-payer's money that is being mis-spent.

What tax money CNMI residents pay is returned to them by way of rebates and refunds. And as a result, there is no real proprietary interest in how the government spends its money. One can argue on principle about waste or mis-spending, or other failures by the legislature or the administration or executive agencies to act responsibly in fiscal matters. But it's not the same. Voters cannot hold the wastrels, mis-spenders accountable because it is not the voters' money.

On the other hand, if there were a general sales tax - even a small one - the scene would change. Then voters angry about the way the government spends their money would have a stronger, more personal motive for holding elected officials accountable, and would be more inclined to see to it that those who failed to act responsibly were soon voted out of office.

Abhorrent as the idea of a sales tax has been in the past, it is time to reconsider. The government needs an additional source of funds, to begin with, and besides, a modest sales tax has a potential for substantially increasing accountability in government.