

On My Mind

1/23/04

With all the promises and brou-ha about how the 14th Legislature is going to make the CNMI more business- and more investor-friendly, there is only silence about what investments, or what businesses, the legislature intends to promote and encourage. Shouldn't there be some thought, some effort put into determining just what it is that the CNMI needs, or what it is that might prosper here, given the climate, infrastructure, and the available work force?

Are more and bigger garment factories really the answer? More hotels? More poker parlors? More loan sharks? Wouldn't it make more sense to build on what is already here? The CNMI could provide tourist families with rainy-day activities like a roller-skating rink or a foreign film theater. Add to the food chain by promoting mari-culture. Establish nature trails for eco-minded tourists. Encourage and develop local handicraft production. Enhance and promote the museum. Establish a permanent art gallery.

The CNMI could encourage business tourists by supporting constructing of a convention center. Its conferences could offer information and new ideas to local businesses as well as providing a venue for association annual meetings, trade shows, sports activities, etc. Among other things, convention attendees, while they do go shopping, have generally been found to create less stress on the island environment, since their primary purpose does not focus on water sports.

With additional investments, the CNMI could become the health care center for all of Micronesia, the educational training ground for all of Micronesia, or the film training center, or the aviation training center or - imagination's the limit here.

The CNMI could also diversify its resources by developing Rota as its "garden isle," Tinian as its "playground," and Saipan as its business/government center. (If each island offered a different experience, more tourists would be tempted to travel to each of the other two.) One or more of the northern islands could become a center for more adventurous tourists - and feature mountain climbing, volcano viewing, boonie stomping, saunas in what hot springs may be found there.

Wouldn't it be nice if the 14th Legislature were able to approach its aim of improving the business/investment climate with imagination and creativity, as well as a sense of what would benefit the CNMI, a sense of priorities, a sense of what would do the least harm over the long haul?

Further, wouldn't it be nice if its members pledged that new ventures would have to support an equitable and environmentally sustainable society - a goal expressed at the recently held session, in Palau, of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Environment and Development?

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Speaking of development, isn't it ironic that there is suddenly such interest in and concern about making the CNMI hospitable to prospective Chinese tourists? At present, the CNMI lacks signs in Chinese, Chinese-speaking staff at hotels and shops, activities for Chinese tourists - since visits to WWII sites are not so important to the Chinese. Yet there have been thousands of

Chinese living and working on Saipan for more than a decade, and in all that time, no one ever expressed concern about making the CNMI more hospitable to them.

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Along the general lines of tourist development, what would it take to organize volunteers to tear down some of the vines that are killing the flame trees, the Norfolk pines, and other roadside greenery? Is it a crime to tear down vines - even on someone else's property? Is permission needed to tear them down along the road?

Granted that some natural pest control has been initiated, but it's been said it will take years to clear the whole island. In the meantime, should we just let the other trees die? Couldn't groups be organized to clear areas of the vines, similar to the ones who've been organized to clean the beaches, for example? I've been told that tearing down the vines is a very satisfying experience, as the trees are once again free to absorb the sun, breathe the air.....

Natural Resources Conservation Service staff have said that tearing down the vines isn't enough; one must kill the roots. Even so, at least pulling the vines down allows the trees and shrubs to survive and grow until the vines start up again, at which point they can be torn down again. Eventually - at least in theory - the natural pest control will prevent the vines from regrowing.

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'Tearing down,' in turn, brings to mind the resolve expressed by new Senate President Joaquin G. Adriano to change the pattern exhibited by outgoing legislators of taking with them all their office accouterments. Adriano announced earlier this week that he intends to introduce a bill that would put an end to the removal of any furniture or equipment from their offices by outgoing legislators.

Though one would have expected such a rule to have been in place long ago, and Adriano is not new to the Senate, it's interesting to see the difference that being in a leadership position apparently makes in some people. It would be nice if Adriano added to his bill a prohibition against removing non-personal documents from legislative offices as well. At present, much legislative history is lost with each change of office.

The prohibition - against removing either furniture or documents - should probably be broadened to apply not only to legislators, but to all government employees leaving office.

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A local industry that might be of interest to investors is making paper from banana stalks. A recent issue of the <I>Australian National Geographic</I> describes the work of Tom Johnston, a banana farmer, and Ramy Azer, an Egyptian scientist, who combined forces to use the fiber in banana stalks to make paper, much as the Egyptians did from papyrus. Johnston has developed a mechanical harvester that can remove bananas while leaving the stems intact. This provides Azer with the long stalks needed for maximum retrieval of the fibers, the article reports.

According to the story, written for the <I>ANG</I> by Chrissie Goldrick, Remy veneers the stem fibers into very fine strips, which are then layered at 90 degrees to each other. The fiber produces a sap which laminates the layers together creating sheets, which are then dried for 21 days to produce the paper. Remy claims the same technique could also be used for sugar cane and coconut palm residue.

“There’s a negligible environmental impact in using waste products, and a positive benefit in reducing mountains of banana trees,” Remy says in the article. “The resulting product is 300 times stronger than normal paper[, is] biodegradable, and uses no chemicals or water in the process, unlike modern pulp-based papermaking. Moreover, it is grease- and water-resistant, making it suitable for use in food-packaging, with the potential to replace plastic and polystyrene products,” Remy adds. And used cartons could be chipped for stockfeed, or sent to the landfill where they would decompose in 10 days, he notes.

More information on the project can be found at “www.transformaustralia.com.au.”

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At the opposite end of the scale, the U.S. has once again rejected global goals and succumbed to private interests, this time causing a delay in implementation of a United Nations program to promote healthy food and lifestyles. A draft Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health issued by the U.N.’s World Health Organization states that poor diets and lack of exercise are the leading causes of nearly 60 percent of the 56.5 million deaths a year deemed preventable. It recommends a reduction of sugar, sodium and fatty acids in the diet, and proposes that governments adopt taxation and subsidy policies to promote healthier eating habits.

But the U.S., catering to its domestic food lobby, especially the sugar industry, is disputing experts’ findings that heavy marketing of high-calorie foods and advertising junk food on children’s television contributes to poor health, and has asked WHO to change the wording of the text, thereby causing a delay in approval of the U.N. agency’s program.

The story appeared in Thursday’s <I>Variety</I> as a press release from Reuters.