

On My Mind

1/30/04

On my mind is jubilation. We have won! The proposal to use Sugar Dock as a ferry terminal is dead! Hurray for the people! (Note: in an opinion column, which this is, such "bias" is permissible....) From all accounts, the Commonwealth Ports Authority apparently decided to bow to public pressure. It withdrew its application to the Coastal Resources Management Office for a permit to dredge the lagoon and reconstruct the dock for use of a ferry between Saipan and Tinian - just hours before the final public hearing on the issue.

It might, perhaps, have been more satisfying if it had been the six agencies that make up the CRM "board" that had stopped the project by denying the permit. And it would be interesting, even now, to know how they would have voted. (No doubt they breathed a sigh of relief that they did not have to.) Observers had speculated that the six (Commerce, CUC, DEQ, Historic Preservation Office, Lands and Natural Resources, and Public Works) would not have been able to come to a unanimous decision - which would have meant the application would have been forwarded to the governor for his action - and that the governor would have made a point of being off island, leaving it up to the lieutenant governor, who is known to have been opposed to the project. So - the result would probably have been the same, but a decision by the government to yield to public pressure would certainly have been impressive!

Which is not to say that having an agency - particularly one as grasping as the CPA - yield to public pressure isn't impressive in its own right.

Equally impressive was the phenomenon of a large number of previously un-related and unaffiliated people willingly joining forces to work together towards a common cause. It occurred without a formal organization, without election of officers, without a membership fee, without by-laws. It was, in effect, an impromptu and informal NGO (non-governmental organization). And it worked! Everyone contributed according to his or her interests, resources and abilities, and together, they reached their goal: to keep Sugar Dock unspoiled and accessible to everyone.

It was a wonderful example of what concerned citizens can do, if they care enough.

It was also a wonderful example of a government agency that, in carrying out its job, was consistently considerate, dedicated, efficient, objective, open and accessible, professional and above all, community-friendly. Would that more of our government - and private - agencies were the same!

<center>* * *</center>

But the story isn't over yet. Two concerns remain. The first is already being worked on: passage of a bill in the legislature to ensure that Sugar Dock and its beach area remain in the public domain, so to speak, and remain freely accessible to the public as a recreational area. Yet unresolved, however, is the question of to whom to assign jurisdiction and responsibility for doing so.

At present, title to the land is held by the Port Authority. That must be changed. Though the Department of Lands and Natural Resources would at first seem the logical choice, there is some concern that if a bill introduced in the 13th Legislature - which gave DLNR the authority to charge user fees at recreational areas under its jurisdiction - is reintroduced and passed by the 14th Legislature, Sugar Dock users would eventually be charged for access to the area.

Would simply returning it to the Marianas Public Land Authority be sufficient? Or should title be

transferred to the Saipan Mayor's Office, for example?

The other unresolved issue relating to the demise of the proposed Sugar Dock ferry, has to do with the ferry itself - or the lack thereof. First, there is the collapse of the promised transportation of cars between Tinian and Saipan. But the economic feasibility of that has never been established. After all, if the ferry takes two hours to make the trip, and it charges more than the cost of renting a car for a day, what advantage does it offer?

There is also the dilemma in which it leaves the Tinian Dynasty. It is generally understood that the Dynasty would have ceased ferry operations if the Sugar Dock ferry began operation. The Dynasty, long at a disadvantage because the promised direct airline access has even yet not materialized, is also suffering from the high cost of operating its ferry. It is ironic that with so much effort being put into enticing more investors to the CNMI, so little is being done to alleviate the problems of the investors who built the Tinian Dynasty. One can't help wonder to what extent there isn't a bit of parochialism involved.

<center>* * *</center>

Speaking of investors, there is also the concern that the Sugar Dock experience could be seen as evidence of an inhospitality to investors in general. Every effort should be made, by all involved, to make sure that this is not the impression that is created, that it is countered at every opportunity, and that the real facts of the matter are made known. This ferry venture was ill-conceived, poorly planned, and based on numerous false assumptions.

Why, for example, was it designed with such a small/slow engine, that only a southern Saipan departure seemed workable? Why was it designed to have to turn around, rather than being able to go forward from either end, as many ferries nowadays are? Why wasn't it planned in conjunction with the Tinian Dynasty, so that the needs of both investors, their knowledge and experience, their funding, couldn't have been combined? How could the Port Authority, and/or Island Transportation have been so unaware of the importance of Sugar Dock to so many people?

As Sugar Dock supporters repeated over and over: the objection was not to the ferry, but to where it would have been docked. In fact, today's <I>Tribune</I> features a story on its front page in which the heads of HANMI and the Chamber of Commerce say exactly that: the objection was to the site, not the project, and a ferry - at a different dock - would be welcome.

<center>* * *</center>

And speaking of investors, here's an idea for a small investor: why not provide comfortable individual booths - or their equivalent - where those renting video-cassettes or DVD's would be able to sit and watch their shows, in relative privacy, on large screens? Not all those who rent videos or DVD's have large enough screens to do the films justice. So why not, for a fee, provide it to them? Concessionaires could sell pop-corn, soft drinks, maybe even pizza for the viewers.

It could be done in conjunction with film rental outlets, or separately.

<center>* * *</center>

Did anyone see the story about BankPacific's new check processing scheme (<I>Variety</I>, 1/23/04, p 8)? More importantly, did anyone understand it? The nine-paragraph story is so full of jargon as to make it incomprehensible. The new system offers "a browser-based user interface, high-powered query engine, and flexible multi-bank, multi-state and multi-date processing," says the article.

"Image exchange only scratches the surface of the possible benefits through electronic check truncation. Implementing an image-based infrastructure provides bankers with the tools needed for realizing full cost savings and efficiencies," are, apparently, the advantages of the new system.

"We are looking to improve check processing and operation efficiencies and reduce overall costs for digital imaging, document and report retention," said its bank president.

And where does that leave the customer, pray tell?

<center>* * *</center>

Speaking of customers, users, beneficiaries and the like, let us hope that the NMI Retirement Fund, Commonwealth Development Agency, and Marianas Public Land Trust remain firm in their insistence that NMC's president show more complete and accurate data on just how viable its Gateway project really is before "loaning" it some of their funds. So far, NMC hasn't been able to persuade any banks or other investors. If the deal wasn't credible to them, it can hardly be deemed acceptable to the NMIRF, CDA or MPLT.

