

On My Mind

2/27/04

Does the San Roque Fiesta Mall have a future? Or will it continue to be the "white elephant" (defined, variously, in the "American Heritage College Dictionary," 3rd edition, as "a rare expensive possession that is a financial burden to maintain; something of dubious or limited value; an article no longer wanted by its owner; an endeavor or a venture that fails conspicuously") that it has been ever since the economy collapsed, and hopes for development in the north disappeared?

Northern Marianas College has put a down payment on lease-purchase of the mall with the intent - however far-fetched - of moving large parts of its present campus to the mall, and of better accommodating its proposed Gateway program. But with Gateway's primary proponent having resigned, and inception of the Gateway program already delayed, and particularly in light of NMC's financial woes, perhaps it's time to re-assess just how useful and/or necessary the Fiesta Mall really is to NMC's future.

The Fiesta Mall is an interesting place, decoratively speaking, but it is not an efficient or effective space, functionally speaking. For starters, it does not provide well in terms of access for the disadvantaged. There are stairs everywhere - some, full staircases, others of only two or three steps - throughout the entire complex. Presumably there are elevators, but given the number of changes in level, not nearly enough to make access convenient.

There is no coherent traffic pattern. It is impossible, for example, to consecutively check out every store by starting at one end and going to the other, without having to double back several times along the way.

It might be possible to convert the most northern of the buildings to an athletic facility for students, but that - together with providing them with gathering, socializing space - could cost a considerable amount of money, not to mention the cost of converting the stores to classrooms and offices and a bookstore and a cafeteria and laboratories and all the other needs of a college campus.

Then there is the cost of maintenance and upkeep. There are plants and fountains and pools throughout. Where will the funding come from to keep them healthy, operational? Who will maintain the power plant? Can the existing water and wastewater system withstand daily use by hundreds of students? Maintenance and upkeep of such awkward facilities, never mind the decorations, is also bound to be costly. How big will the Gateway program have to be to underwrite those costs?

And if the costs of upkeep and maintenance are high, how much of the expected revenue from the Gateway project will be left to do what was originally intended: provide better salaries for staff and faculty, support and enhancement of NMC's academic programs, and a broadening of the scope of its offerings?

Given its problems, it's not clear that the Fiesta Mall would appear attractive to many buyers, but given those problems, what is clear is that NMC would be far better off selling it than trying to hold on to it.

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On the other hand, NMC's public radio station KRNM, and more specifically, its manager Carl Pogue, deserve high praise for the entrepreneurship, inventiveness, persistence, and downright zeal Pogue exercised in arranging to bring well-known concert pianist Katya Grineva to Saipan earlier this week.

The concert milieu - a recently remodeled restaurant - was small, informal, clearly never intended as a performance hall. The microphone was on too short a cord. The piano seemed a little fragile, its notes not always as resonant, as true, as those of a concert-quality instrument. A wandering palmetto bug disrupted the proceedings. Nonetheless, the evening was truly magical.

Grineva played a number of familiar pieces, a few less well-known. Her fingers never stumbled in the many fast-paced and demanding runs, trills, glissandos. The piano alternately thundered, sighed and sang under her sensitive touch. It was all achingly beautiful. And the more so because live concert performances are so rare here.

In her formal taffeta gown, the very accomplished artist herself was lovely, gracious, charming.

Pogue's feat? Having heard that Grineva was on Guam, Pogue decided to try bring her to Saipan. Despite the short notice, he did manage to persuade her to come, did find a venue, did find and get tuned a piano, and did manage, through diligent promotion, to sell enough tickets to make the event a success not only in terms of the performance, but in terms of the station's fund-raising. Thanks, Carl! And many, many thanks, Katya!

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Thanks of a different sort to all those involved in the decision not to raise CHC fees for service at this time. It was a good move!

When CHC again wants to try raise its fees - and it is bound to do so, given the rising costs of everything related to medical care - it might want to try a different approach. It might be useful, for example, to give the public more than 30-days warning before increases go into effect. If a major increase is intended, it might be better to phase in the increase over time.

It might also want to offer some explanations as to why such different rates of increase are being proposed among the varying services - why some rates would be increased by only a few dollars, and others increased by more than \$100, for example.

Everyone accepts - albeit sometimes not too willingly! - that rate increases are inevitable. But good public relations requires that the community be kept fully apprised of the why, when, how

and how much involved.

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The belated awareness, by the public, of the proposed hospital rate increases raises the question, once again, of why information about proposed regulations is not more readily available to the public. The Attorney General's office is no doubt adhering to the original Trust Territory Code, as incorporated into the Commonwealth Code, which states that prior to adoption of any regulation, the agency shall give at least 30 day's notice by publishing it in the "Commonwealth Register" and by posting it in convenient places in the civic center and local and government offices.

But particularly given today's hi-tech capabilities, such measures are primitive at best. A start would be to timely publish the table of contents of each issue of the "Commonwealth Register" in the local newspapers. The Chamber of Commerce attempts to do this in its monthly bulletin, but not only is it sometimes late, but it also reaches only a small portion of the community.

More helpful, of course, would be to put the entire contents of each issue of the Register on-line. If the House and Senate can publish the full text of their bills and laws, if the Public Auditor can publish the full text of his reports, on-line, why could not the AG publish the full text of proposed and approved regulations?

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<I>Something to ponder: </I>

"If the world is to avoid a descent into anarchy, in which the only rule is "might makes right," the world - and particularly the United States - must recognize that "terrorism" is simply a word, a subjective epithet, not an objective reality and certainly not an excuse to suspend rules of international law and domestic civil liberties.

"Every nation - and particularly the United States, - must also recognize that in a world filled with injustice, violent outbursts by those hoping desperately for a better life- or simply seeking to strike a blow against injustice or their tormentors before they die - can never be eradicated.

"At best, the frequency and gravity of such outbursts can be diminished by seeking to alleviate - rather than continuing to aggravate - the injustice and humiliations that give rise to them....Perfect security is, and will always be, an illusion, and "victory" in a "war on terrorism" is no more likely than in a "war on poverty," a "war on crime," or a "war on drugs."

"It is long overdue, but not too late, for the American people to liberate themselves from the aggression and self-destructive paranoia inflicted on them by unscrupulous abusers of an undefinable word."

(Excerpted from: "'Terrorism': a world ensnared by a word" by John V. Whitbeck, which appeared in the on-line edition of the 2/17/04 issue of "The International Tribune.")

