

On My Mind

3/5/02

As a Tanapag resident, I was thankful to see the sewage problem in our village once again attract public attention, make headlines in both papers, as happened earlier this week. But I am also frustrated. The problem has made headlines, attracted public attention before, but it is still there, still unresolved. Will this time make a difference?

Unfortunately, sewage problems are not unique to Tanapag. All over the western side of the island, there are problems - frequent sewer overflows in the Lower Base area near the Public Works beach, in the Garapan area - both near American Memorial Park, near the Dai Ichi Hotel - reportedly also in Koblerville, San Antonio, Middle Road.

Then there's the outfall in the harbor, which also doesn't work consistently or properly.

According to the report in the papers, CUC claims that it is all a matter of redirecting wastewater flow, which in turn depends on completion of the Airport sewer line project - which is behind schedule - and an upgrade to the Beach Road system - still only in the design stage - and upgrading pump stations, for which it says it has insufficient funding..

But with wastewater control nearly as important as safe drinking water, for overflowing sewers not only smell, but also spread disease - and particularly since overflowing sewers seem to be the rule nowadays rather than the exception - just waiting for time to pass, for sufficient funds to appear from somewhere, in order to get them fixed, is simply not acceptable. Even the imposition of fines by CRM, DEQ and EPA does not seem to have had an effect.

One could, of course, file suit on the grounds that public health is at risk under present circumstances. Or one could hire a consultant - two typical knee-jerk reactions to such problems. But history indicates that neither holds out much hope for effective resolution, or for cost-effectiveness. More apt to bring resolution would be to give the wastewater problems to a local task force or, perhaps, to assign them to the already established Water Task Force. Not to be facetious, what comes in must go out, and the Water Task Force might just as well work on both bringing water to, and removing water from, our homes and businesses.

The overflows, the lagoon outfall, add new threats to groundwater, new pollution to Saipan's waters, every day. For the sake of the people who live here - as well as for the sake of the tourists who only visit - action must be taken - sooner rather than later.

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According to knowledgeable sources, garment industry members continue to be significant contributors to the island's wastewater problems. Despite repeated remonstrations, a number of garment industry members persist in flushing cloth remnants down the sewer, as well as the pumice stones used in creating a stone-washed look.

Inspections have shown that such factories are not using appropriate grids, sediment traps, or screens - and that those put in place are often removed. As a result, the cloth remnants clog the sewer pipes, causing overflows; the stones overburden the pumps, causing them to burn out.

As fines do not seem to have had much of an effect, perhaps here too, public focus, directed through a task force, would be more effecting in bringing compliance.

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On a brighter note, Randy Mendoza, leader of the campaign to bring "legitimacy" to approximately 300 stateless persons, deserves a medal - or the equivalent thereof - for the success of his campaign so far. A hearing by the CNMI House Committee on Federal and Foreign Relations held at the Susupe multi-purpose Civic Center earlier this week drew not only a standing-room-only crowd of attendees, but a full panel of seven House members, including the Speaker and the Floor Leader.

However, of five government agencies asked to testify, only Joaquin A. Tenorio, Secretary, Department of Labor, and Fermi M. Atalig, Acting Secretary of Finance, showed up - both, in their brief remarks, supporting House Bill 14-97, which would give the stateless persons status as permanent residents of the CNMI. The Attorney General's Office, Office of the Public Auditor, and Department of Commerce, though apparently on the list of witnesses, did not send anyone to the hearing. Presumably, the agencies submitted written comments.

The most moving testimony came from Department of Public Safety Commissioner Edward C. Camacho, who recounted the frustrations he had encountered - prior to the granting of citizenship to the people of the CNMI in 1986 - in trying to join the military, and, having finally accomplished that, in fighting for the right to rise above the rank of an enlisted man. He recalled, he said, being envious of those who did hold U.S. citizenship.

Because of those experiences, he said, he understands and fully supports Mendoza's campaign to achieve recognition for the stateless persons. Camacho told Mendoza that the likely passage of House Bill 14-97 was only the first step, and promised to continue to support Mendoza's efforts until the U.S. Congress granted them all full citizenship.

The hearing was one of the best attended I've seen - both in terms of House members present, and in terms of "audience." Randy Mendoza, together with his team of officers, deserve full credit for the accomplishment.

(The stateless persons were born in the CNMI between January 9, 1978 and November 4, 1986, falling into a crack in the provisions of the Covenant which denies them U.S. citizenship (though Sam McPhetres, CNMI historian, stated at the hearing that the correct beginning date should be January 1, 1974). They cannot enlist in the U.S. armed forces, are not eligible for federal higher education grants and scholarships, are not eligible for jobs which require U.S. citizenship, are not eligible for U.S. passports, and thus are not assured re-entry into the CNMI once they leave - for whatever reason.)

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Congressman Justo S. Quitugua told of similar struggles he encountered in trying to enroll in the military, trying to go beyond the rank of non-commissioned officer, in his comments at the public hearing. His account, together with that of Commissioner Camacho, offers strong and very direct testimony in regard to the significance of citizenship to the people of the CNMI.

It is strange -to say the least - that none of this is reflected in the non-ceremony that accompanies the annual observance of Citizenship Day in the Commonwealth.

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Short takes:

- Don't say I didn't tell you so. The CNMI paid former Interior official Danny Aranza \$600,000 to ensure that its Homeland Security plan qualified for federal grants, only to find out that that \$600,000 didn't do what it was supposed to after all - the CNMI having just been informed that the grant application was flawed.

- Somehow it doesn't seem very friendly, or neighborly, or in accordance with the Pacific Way, to ban Indonesians from entering the CNMI, while so many CNMI residents continue to visit Bali - a part of Indonesia - on a regular basis. Indonesia is one of 30 countries on a list recently issued by the CNMI Attorney General's office from which visitors to the CNMI are now banned.

- One could say the same about Dr. Jesus D. Camacho's gratuitous criticism of Judge Ken Govendo's defense of the environment in his recent speech to members of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources. People who know Govendo respect and appreciate his outspoken honesty, his championship of worthy causes. But not to worry. Camacho isn't commanding much of a readership these days.

- If only the Legislative Bureau could guarantee that hiring all those extra attorneys for the House and Senate would result in better laws that are better written! One can only hope that the increase in cost is met with funds taken from the legislative budget, rather than those of the executive branch.

- NASA has just reported evidence that "liquid water" was once present on Mars. What other kind of water is there, pray tell?