

On My Mind

4/23/09

I've always known - and readily admitted - that I was numerically challenged, and to protect myself, I always try my best to avoid using figures. But I slipped up, big-time, in last week's column, where I blithely suggested that the bank suing Tony Pellegrino take ownership of the Outer Marina as payment, thus relieving Pellegrino of his debt to the bank, and the CNMI of its obligation, through a negotiated settlement agreement, to Pellegrino's Marine Revitalization Corp. But there was the small matter of an extra digit in the numbers - the bank debt is in the six-figure range, the CNMI obligation in the seven-figure range. My abject apologies to all and sundry.

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Last week-end's surfeit of over-lapping events makes even more obvious the need for a reliable "events master calendar" for the island. At one time, one of the newspapers took this on. Now, no one does. How much would it take to get an interactive calendar up on the web, so that organizations trying to schedule an event could see whether their date conflicted with anyone else's event?

Taking place last week-end were the Flame Tree Arts Festival, the X-terra event, the San Vicente Fiesta, the JoeTen-Kiyu library's book sale and the crowning of the Miss Teen CNMI winner, not to mention the big JoeTen "moonlight" sale. Each event could have drawn an ever bigger crowd - if there hadn't been such competition.

A network provider could take this on, or the Chamber of Commerce, or the Humanities Council, or the Visitor's Authority or NMC or the library or some other public-spirited organization or individual.....to everyone's benefit.

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This past week's Division of Environmental Quality's one-day symposium offered a rich and varied menu - with facts, figures and visuals about everything from forest bird populations to solid waste management and re-cycling, a panel of legislators, and a real-life snake bite, not to mention a separate roomful of interactive, fact-filled and visual demonstrations of everything from ground glass to water pollution patterns to melon-fly eradication.

Unfortunately, the program ran late, and several speakers were simply dropped from the agenda. A major reason for the tardiness: the late arrival of the governor, who had been asked to make the opening remarks. Since the governor is consistently late to such events, and his tardiness inevitably snarls the agenda, there isn't any reason, it seems to me, why such programs could not start on time - and then, when the governor finally does show up, stop to let him make his speech. Who would lose?

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The House of Representatives seems determined to deal with the governor's "Integrated Fiscal Plan" as a whole, and while, in the abstract, the whole is generally deemed to be greater than its parts, in this case that may not necessarily be true. There are parts of the plan that stand no chance of passage, but other parts do have merit, and should be acted upon.

In his search for revenue, the governor proposes, among other things, to take the monies budgeted for some 250 personnel and use it to fix other problems, leaving the positions unfilled. Such an arbitrary across-the-board cut in personnel doesn't begin to take into account the particular needs of agencies for whom the personnel slot may represent a crucial aspect of their program.

More rational would be a cut in personnel according to some sort of desk audit that identifies redundant or functionless positions.

On the other hand, reducing income tax rebates (not refunds) makes perfect sense. The rebate has been a "gift" from the very beginning, which makes it all the more difficult to justify in times of government shortfalls. When one is short of money, it's just not logical to give it away anyway.

Besides, without a personal stake in how the government spends its funds, most people do not seem all that upset at wasteful and extravagant use of those funds - they are after all, monies from the feds, from other resources, not from their own pockets. But once people are hit directly in their own pocket, their interest in, and concern for, where that money goes becomes much more personal. It's their money, and they're apt to be much more concerned about what happens to it.

At present, though people are taxed indirectly in a variety of ways - through the trickle-down effect from business gross receipt taxes, alcohol and liquor taxes, business license fees, auto licenses, etc. - except for the income tax, they do not make a direct contribution towards paying for the cost of government. Asking them to do so should generate a far stronger feeling of ownership, of being stakeholders, in government actions and processes than is now evident.

The governor, in his IFP, did not raise the issue of a sales tax as a source of revenue, but this too, is something it's high time the House should consider. The initial reaction is bound to be that in these times of economic hardship, people cannot afford such a tax. But if the alternate is a decrease in public services, people cannot afford not to pay such a tax. Set at reasonable levels, it will not create an adverse effect, and, in addition to providing a new source of revenue, will increase people's interest in a more efficient government - since they are directly paying for it.

There may well be other portions of the IFP that can be excerpted and enacted. There is no need to dismiss the thing in its entirety.

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In its deliberations over what to do with the Fiesta Mall, Northern Marianas College might want to take advantage of an in-house power-house who has shown extraordinary skills in developing

an impressive community/campus library on the grounds of Rota's NMC campus. Severina A. Ogo, Administrator of Rota's NMC campus, is creative, energetic, enthusiastic, fearless, imaginative, knowledgeable - and she has used all these skills and more to pull together the design, furnishings and equipment for what will, once everything is in place, become a model for an effective, pro-active, forward-looking public/school/community college library and learning center.

She has already instituted a more modest, manageable version of the "Gateway" project envisioned by NMC's former president for the Rota campus, believing that short-term courses will be more practical - at least for the short term. And asked if she could make a working campus from the maze that is the Fiesta Mall, she said, without hesitation, that she was sure she could. And I believe her.

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Short takes:

- It has been suggested that the Department of Public Safety, in addition to, or as occasional substitute for, road side car-seat or seat belt inspections, check to make sure drivers have a current driver's license and that their car is properly insured. I'm not sure whether such violations of the law are subject to fine, but if they are, what a great way to build up the coffers of the DPS! And if they're not, the check might convince those without license or insurance to go get them.

- Another suggestion: that each business be held responsible for the cleanliness of its own premises, both inside and outside. It might take a change of law to hold businesses responsible for the litter on their premises, but that hardly seems an insurmountable problem. Litter, after all, is not only a visual insult, but is also a potential health hazard as well as an environmental hazard.

- And one more: Las Vegas attracts tourists not only because of its casinos, but also because of its staging of performances by well-known artists. Many people are drawn to Las Vegas - and stay longer - so that they may take in the elaborate shows at its various hotels. Perhaps the Tinian Dynasty could increase its patronage by doing the same. While directly bringing in U.S. mainland shows would probably not be cost-effective, picking up shows already scheduled for Guam should be more affordable. In addition, bringing in shows from Japan, China, other parts of Asia, could prove an attraction to Saipan residents as well as tourists

- It is reassuring to note that the Marianas Public Land Authority is exercising some prudence in its consideration of the Azmar bid to mine Pagan ash. MPLA's board has asked for verification of Azmar's viability as a company and of its financial status. While its meeting to discuss the project on Tinian was inconsiderate at best, in this case it appears, at least, to be asking the right questions.

