

On My Mind  
1/07/05

This Sunday marks the twenty-seventh anniversary of the day the very first Commonwealth governor was sworn into office, a holiday commemorated as Commonwealth Day, the first "C" day of the new year. I've always faulted the Trust Territory government for not having provided Carlos C. Camacho, who took that first oath of office as governor of the CNMI, more help in how to go about carrying out his responsibilities. One sends newly-appointed judges to the mainland for training; why couldn't the same have been done for the CNMI's first-time governor?

He had an opportunity to become the "father of his country" - to set precedents for all other governors to follow. But, instead, with no other model to follow - at least in the beginning - he appeared to model his actions after the TT High Commissioner. He had a chauffeur; he was accompanied by body guards as he attended various island functions. He issued large numbers of executive orders.

It is interesting to speculate on whether things would have turned out differently, and if so, how much, had Camacho received any guidance from TT officials.

Once again, however, it appears that there will be no public ceremony, no official observance of this "C" day, which only further supports the suggestion that the four "C" days should be combined into one, and celebrated jointly.

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Congratulations are in order to all who were involved in making the CNMI's Approved Destination Status for Chinese travelers a reality - from those in the Governor's office and the Marianas Visitor's Authority to the Attorney General's office, the Department of Labor and its Immigration Division, and the travel agencies! It's been a long road, and it's a great New Year's present to see it finally come through - unlike several other projects that have promised growth and opportunity but have not yet materialized.

It's also kind of gratifying to see Guam eyeing the accomplishment with envy - as expressed in venerable former PDN editor Joe Murphy's column earlier this week. While he begrudgingly acknowledges the CNMI's advantage granted by its Covenant, Murphy nevertheless complains that if the feds do not grant visa-waiver status to Guam, it will constitute discrimination, pure and simple.

The irony here is that Guam almost had a covenant as well, as described in this column earlier this year.

Let us hope that despite the seeming lack of preparation "on the ground," so to speak, that we do not disappoint the Chinese tourists - and that the promise they represent does not disappoint us.

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Some "left-overs" from last week: Congratulations are also due to the people of Tinian for developing a skate-board park, as was reported in the 12/22 issue of the Saipan Tribune. The Tinian Youth Center provides skate boards and safety gear to Tinian youth, and its staff are available to provide help as needed. According to the Division of Youth Services, neither Rota nor Saipan have equivalent skate parks. Sounds like that would be a good project for some benevolent donor..... Done with the proper equipment and in safe surroundings, skate boarding offers youth an opportunity to develop unique skills of balance and agility, among others.

Congratulations as well to the House of Representatives for recognizing the accomplishments and contributions to the CNMI of long-time Saipan resident and present NMC faculty member Sam McPhetres through its recently-passed resolution of commendation. It is unfortunate, however, that the House was not willing to work with others also interested in recognizing McPhetres for his efforts in preserving the historical records of the CNMI, for his role in perpetuating its history, and for his dedication and devotion to his many students.

And one more: Congratulations to economist and former resident Bill Stewart, for laying out in the plainest of terms the folly and the farce being visited upon the CNMI Retirement Fund by the CNMI government. In an article that appeared in the 12/29 Tribune, Stewart begins by asking, "Would any lending institution in the world loan \$20 million to an organization that has repeatedly failed to honor its financial obligations, and still owes millions? Think about it."

Yet that is what the NMI Retirement Fund is being asked to do by the CNMI government - loan it \$20 million as "up-front financing" for the Compact Impact funds the CNMI is expecting from the U.S. government, so that the CNMI government can give \$20 million to the Public School System for its use. As Stewart points out, the CNMI government already owes the Retirement Fund millions of dollars. Moreover, as CUC can also attest, the government's payment record is very poor - generally late, totally unreliable and never consistent. In fact, at this very moment, there is doubt whether the government can even make its PSS payroll this week.

Stewart goes on to discuss the impact on CNMI retirees of the present threat to their pensions as well as the consequences of the already existing threat due to past practices of the CNMI in withholding its payments to the Retirement Fund. Important reading for all who are, or expect to become, retirees of the CNMI government.

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At the opposite end of the spectrum, the bad news is that I missed the announcement of the Marianas Public Land Authority's re-scheduled meeting at which the massage parlor at Managaha Island was to be discussed. The notice appeared in the Tribune Saturday, January 1, and the meeting itself was held on Wednesday January 5<sup>th</sup>. Further, at that meeting, the MPLA approved the request from Mirage Corporation.

According to a report in today's Tribune, the permit had originally been issued in April of 2004,

but administrative issues had held up its actual start-up. The massage facility, the report says, will be located at the west side of Managaha, and will involve no major construction since the company plans to offer its services in a "temporary tent." Maybe they'll let us watch?

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Looking toward the new year, one of the big local stories of the coming year will be the elections, of course, particularly since this year it includes election of the governor. Harry Blalock has already said it, but it bears repeating: people should be careful about taking at face value the actions of our politicians between now and November. While some actions may be genuine and apolitical, others are just as apt to be performed with an eye on the ballot and the act's vote-getting potential.

Given that it looks like there may again be three candidates for the top spot, with its risk that the vote will be split and the prize will go to someone who collects as little as 35% of the votes, we should all be urging the legislature to pass - and provide funding for - a law that would require a run-off election if none of the candidates for governor receives a majority of votes cast. The sooner this law gets on the books, the better.

The economy will also, no doubt, be a major story this coming year - because of the uncertainty of both the effect of the lifting of garment trade barriers, and the effect of the gaining of ADS from China. It is rather doubtful that a sufficient increase in tourists will occur to offset the expected decline in the number of operating garment factories, but the key factor, of course, is how many factories will shut down. And key, in turn, to that question is whether CNMI efforts to persuade the U.S. Congress to change the value-added formula for garments from the CNMI will succeed, and whether it will occur soon enough to prevent further reduction in the total number of garment manufacturers still in operation.

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On a slightly different note, just before Christmas I visited Rota again, this time with my daughter Stacey, who is working with the Indonesian government under a contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development to develop its marine resource planning and policies. It was interesting to see Rota through her eyes - at the range of under-developed eco-tourism possibilities it offers and at the seeming absence of community involvement in tourism activities, despite Rota's purported emphasis on "eco-tourism." There is no information available at the Rota quarry sites, for example, to inform tourists of what they are seeing, and its significance. Nor are there brochures at either the airport or the hotel at which we stayed, about the quarry. There is no option for bird-watching tours - led by locally informed guides - either to the bird sanctuary, or anywhere else on island. Nor information about Rota's unique drongo. There is no way to take a bike tour of its botanical trail, or up to the peace memorial, or to any other place else. In fact, at the moment, they are hard to find at all.

True ecotourism involves educating the tourist, community participation and the preservation and protection of the environment. Rota does the third - up to a point - but there's lots more it could

do in the other areas to truly earn the label of CNMI's eco-tourism island.