

On My Mind

2/25/05

Now that the immediate issue of the sale of Verizon's MTC has been resolved - more or less - isn't it about time that the Commonwealth Telecommunications Commission be brought up to full strength? For far too long, the Commission has been allowed to operate with only three members, though its enabling legislation (P.L. 12-39) calls for five - one from Tinian, one from Rota, and three from Saipan.</P>

<P>Earlier, it had been argued that it would be too difficult to bring new members up to speed, so no effort was made to appoint the two additional members. But new members will have to be, at some point, and while all issues are not yet resolved in the sale process, the major decision has now been made. Additionally, the CTC has been given an increase in its budget, so that it should now be able to afford the \$200 per day's meeting, provided in the law, for the two additional members.</P>

<P>Commissioners are appointed by the governor, with the consent of both houses of the legislature. No more than three members may be members of the same political party. The law requires that each member be a citizen of the U.S., a resident of the Commonwealth, not a full-time employee of the Commonwealth government, not convicted of a felony, and without a direct or indirect financial interest in any company under the jurisdiction of the Commission. The law further provides that members shall have at least a four-year college degree or five years of managerial experience in telecommunications or a related field.</P>

<P>What with the elections already on the horizon, it is not, of course, the best time to make new appointments to boards or commissions. But if capable candidates can be found, it is high time the CTC began operating at full strength.</P>

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<P>A number of readers have offered comment, in response to last week's statement regarding the CNMI's political parties and what it is that makes one different from another, that none seem to be issue-oriented. Where, for example, is the "green" party - one that represents environmental concerns, supports re-cycling, advocates the retention of more green space instead of more strip malls, they asked.</P>

<P>Or where is the party supporting accountability and broader access to information in government? Someone who would endorse former Guam Congressional Delegate Bob Underwood's approach, which he spelled out in a recent column in the Pacific Daily News?. Underwood, speaking of the Guam government's web presence and the lack of a web page for the governor's office, called for the administrative branch to post financial transactions above a certain amount on the Internet, for the governor to post all important contracts on the net, and for the governor to post his staffing pattern on the net so one could follow the changes of personnel and where the money goes. </P>

<P>One could go further, and wish for a comprehensive CNMI government web page, but that's a different issue. Underwood's suggestions were prompted by Guam's gubernatorial antics, but

they make sense for the CNMI as well. But who in the CNMI, which party, supports such transparency?</P>

<P>A larger question is: Is it even possible, in such a small community, to separate politics from family?</P>

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<P>A trivia question: how much power is consumed by all the parking and security lights CUC has erected over the years in response to people wanting to conduct novenas, rosaries, etc., at their homes? Seems that CUC is very good about putting them up, but like they then become permanent fixtures, never to be removed.....</P>

<P>A related question: where does it say that when areas are cleared to allow parking for such events, they must be scraped to bare earthness - leaving not a single strand of grass standing? Doesn't this, too, contribute to the erosion CRM and DEQ and NRCS and SWCD are striving so hard to control?</P>

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<P>The latest issue of Micronesian Counselor, written by Father Fran Hezel, is entitled, "Peeking into the Public Process," and talks about how important access to information is to ensuring good government. Good government - fiscally sound, socially responsible, politically accountable, and fairly and openly administered - leads to a prosperous economic system, good schools and hospitals, civil order - an inviting place in which to live and work, to play, to invest.</P>

<P>The current theory of good government, based on the present understanding of democracy, "is that public pressure is what keeps the government in check and makes it responsible and responsive to all its citizens," writes Hezel. But the public cannot exert pressure if it does not know what the government is doing. Thus, transparency and openness are required. Playing a crucial role in providing this information is the media, Hezel continues, which - if it functions properly [and of course, that's no small "if"!] - assures a steady flow of reliable information on government workings to the public. The public, armed with this information, can then vote corrupt officials out of office, and replace them with people of greater integrity.</P>

<P>In the rural setting of Pacific islands, notes Hezel, information on what island leaders was doing was easy to come by - the villages were small, and everyone could see - or learn through the coconut wireless - what was being done, by whom, to whom. Over time, however, forms of governance have changed, and island leaders are no longer so accessible to their constituents. Information on what their leaders are doing must take different forms, be transmitted differently.</P>

<P>Not all knowledge in Pacific cultures, however, is equally shared, especially that relating to local medicines, genealogies, favorite fishing spots. On the contrary, such knowledge has traditionally been seen as a valuable possession. Hezel says that this may explain why some government officials today are reluctant to provide access to information in their data bases, or do not share what they learned at conferences they attended..</P>

<P>Another barrier to the sharing of information described by Hezel is the traditional Pacific concern with maintaining good personal relations. On small islands, sharing information could disrupt those relationships, create ill will, even cause people to lose their jobs. Thus, there is great reluctance to express open criticism. </P>

<P>According to Hezel, this leaves the media with the responsibility of doing what the public is not willing to do itself: ask the hard questions, share the information, criticize leaders. And while media does not always function as it should, "the media bears responsibilities of its own, to the public it serves and to the government that protects its rights....As strong as the temptation might be at times," writes Hezel, "the media should not carve up individuals and serve them for dinner to the public."</P>

<P>There must be mutual respect - a bonding agent for all island societies - "for it is what keeps people from one another's throats and prevents societies from falling into barbarism," he quotes a conference participant on this issue as saying. "Media may be indispensable in today's world, but it must still pay its cultural dues," adds Hezel.</P>

<P>Good government, he concludes, demands accountability of government to the people it serves. This depends on those conduits of information that we call the media, but they in turn depend on reliable information flow from the government that allows everyone an x-ray view of what it's doing.</P>

<P>The full text of this issue of Micronesian Counselor, past issues, and much more, are available on the Micronesian Seminar web site as "www.micsem.org."</P>

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<P>The question here is: as governments make more of their information available on the web, and as more people gain access to that information via their home computers, to what extent will the role of media change? what function should it perform?</P>

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<P>Short takes:

<P>- Congratulations to the Office of the Public Auditor for once again being singled out for its achievements and accomplishments. The Association of Pacific Island Public Auditors just awarded the NMI OPA its highest possible rating, based on an external quality control peer review, "for exemplifying the highest standards of the auditing profession,". The OPA won an identical accolade several years ago from the same organization as a result of a peer review by Guam Public Auditor Doris Flores-Brooks, Guam OPA Audit Manager Randall Wiegand, and USDA technical consultant Charles Hester. This year's peer review team: Yap Public Auditor Gertrude Gootinan, Republic of the Marshall Islands Auditor General Jean Tonyokwe and APIPA Technical Consultant Charles Hester. Well done, Mike!</P>

<P>-Did anyone notice that the re-cycling center in Lower Base is now accepting tin cans as well as aluminum cans? Magazines and catalogs as well as newspaper? Paperboard as well as cardboard? A full list of what the center will accept appeared in the Tribune on February 4 - there's also a flyer that can be picked up at the center. Remember: the more we re-cycle, the longer our landfill will last!