

On My Mind
3/18/05

Having noted, last week, that elections were still nearly eight months away, but that political considerations were already afflicting both the legislative and the executive branch, I'd now have to say that those elections can't come soon enough, given new evidence not only of those considerations but of downright ineptitude - particularly in the House.</P>

With only ill-informed objections, eight members of the House this past week defeated Representative Clyde Norita's proposed constitutional initiative that would, by turning the legislature into a part-time, rather than a full-time one, reduce the legislative budget by \$2.4 million. Instead of letting the people decide, those eight legislators, too worried about their own income, took it upon themselves to deprive the rest of us of the opportunity to make that decision.</P>

I don't ordinarily cite groups of individuals by name, but in this case I believe it is warranted. The eight who voted against the initiative were: Representatives David Apatang, Jesus Attao, Joseph Deleon Guerrero, Heinz S. Hofschneider, Janet Maratita, Arnold I. Palacios, Benjamin B. Seman, and Ramon Tebetub.</P>

Obviously, they did not bother to check out what the National Conference of State Legislators has to say about the subject, at <<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/about/partfulllegis.htm>>. At another site, <www.ncsl.org/programs/legman/03table-legcomp.htm>, the NCSL displays the salary and per diem paid members of each state legislature. This site, in fact, reveals all sorts of interesting information - for example, that in Nevada, legislators are paid the Federal rate for the capitol city area - but their attendance must be vouchered. Legislators who live more than 50 miles from Carson City, if lodging is required, are paid the HUD single-room rate for the capitol area for each month of session.</P>

In Tennessee, in order to receive their pay, the legislators "[s]ession attendance is verified by roll calls submitted by the House and Senate Chief Clerks. Committee attendance is verified by roll calls submitted by each standing committee's office." And in Minnesota - the only state listed as giving different compensation to state senators and representatives, "Senators receive \$66/day and Representatives received \$56/legislative day (U[n]vouchered)" set by the legislature."</P>

The NCSL provides yet another site, this one offering more details on time requirements of legislative work, at <<http://www.ncsl.org/legis/pubs/03SLJulAugOFR.pdf>>. Unfortunately, to access this site requires membership in the NCSL, so I was not able to read what it said.</P>

The point is that there is much readily available information - from reliable sources - on how other states manage their part-time legislatures. It's too bad that those eight representatives never bothered to look it up, but instead raised weak and irrelevant objections to Norita's proposal. While nine members did support it, since it is an initiative to amend the constitution, it requires a 3/4 majority of 14 votes in order to pass.</P>

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Another "ineptitude" on the part of the current members of the House: their passage of significant changes to the Nonresident Workers Act, which just recently underwent major revision that the House is now trying to undo. Where were those members, and their objections, when the changes were under discussion? Why weren't those objections raised at the time? The changes made to the Act - through associated regulations - were published in the Commonwealth Register, and were open to comment through public hearings. Yet the objections now being raised were not voiced at the time.</P>

It would appear that House members have now panicked at the consequences - which those regulations were intended to prepare for - of garment factory closings. The Attorney General's Office and the Department of Labor, on the other hand, had anticipated the consequences of having hundreds of garment factory workers suddenly unemployed, and spent a great deal of time and effort finding equitable ways of coping with the problem. The rules regarding transfer of workers, allowing second jobs for workers, allowing transfer of worker slots from a closed factory to one still operating, were specifically designed to accommodate those hundreds of suddenly unemployed workers. The AG's office, the DLO, were thinking ahead.</P>

What House members hope to accomplish by now wiping out all those provisions - except hostile, truly punitive actions against those workers - is anyone's guess. If the unemployed workers can't find other jobs, and the employers can't afford to send them back, and labor bonding companies don't have the funds either, what do they think will happen to those workers? Where are they supposed to go? What are they supposed to do?</P>

There's a sort of bittersweet irony in the House Speaker's defense of his vote in favor of the revisions. He said he wanted to bar jobless garment factory workers from taking such jobs as gas station attendant, jet ski concession attendant, retail and warehouse stocker and other non-skilled entry level positions so that they could be reserved for locals. Isn't it about time that the legislature worried about reserving such jobs as teachers, teacher aids, accountants, librarians and library aids, administrative assistants, executive secretaries, and the like, for aspiring locals - the white collar jobs - instead of only blue-collar jobs?</P>

Fortunately there are two hurdles the bill passed by the House - unanimously, this time - must yet overcome before it becomes law: the Senate must approve, and the governor must sign it. Let us hope that one or the other has the sense to see that the bill does not become law.</P>

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On the administrative side, despite disclaimers that the over-all personnel count has gone down (hard to believe in the face of the Variety's picture of "dozens of newly-hired government workers" being oriented at the Susupe multi-purpose center earlier this week), what count are reductions in dollar amounts, rather than numbers of people. And hiring a former Senator now presumably collecting retirement pay at an annual salary rate of \$100,000/year - to cite just the most recent example - doesn't sound like much of a cost reduction to me.</P>

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And it doesn't get better. Now the House wants to ban poker machines from the villages - which is all to the good - but, as proposed by House majority leader Oscar M. Babauta, House Bill 14-267 would place them along Beach and Middle Roads instead. Beach Road? Isn't that

supposed to be Saipan's scenic highway? Can't you just picture it - with garish poker parlor signs across the street all along the pathway? Isn't anyone thinking up there?????

First of all, the number of poker parlors should be reduced. And those that remain should be restricted to tourist/hotel compounds. Wasn't that the argument for allowing them in the first place - that they would be for tourists? Must we advertise our rapaciousness by putting them along the roadside - where everyone - including tour busses and visiting dignitaries and congressional delegations - can plainly see them?

And then there's the statement by House vice-speaker Tim Villagomez, who is pushing for the abolition of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Commission because, according to a quote in today's *Variety*, he believes the CTC "does not do anything right now" in addressing telecommunication rates.

Obviously, the chairman of the House Public Utilities, Transportation and Communications Committee - a position Villagomez also holds - has not been doing a very good job of keeping up with the activities of the CTC. Had he done so, he would have known that the CTC has indeed focused considerable attention on the matter of protecting consumers from increases in telecommunication rates.

As I said, the elections can't come soon enough!

Short takes:

- As is typical, much debate lacks substance because no one has bothered to do the research, to collect the facts, the evidence, the proof. A case in point are the letters to the editor that insist that those opposed to paying on-duty reserves their "civilian" salaries are somehow disloyal, unpatriotic. The facts are that a private first class on duty with the Army reserves, with less than two years' service, is paid a base salary of \$1,456.20 monthly, plus a basic subsistence allowance of \$267 monthly, plus a \$250 monthly separation allowance if s/he is married, plus a \$504 basic housing allowance if s/he has dependents, plus both \$225 imminent danger and \$150 hazardous duty allowances if s/he is serving in areas like Iraq - all tax exempt. Not to mention free medical care, insurance benefits, and shopping privileges at the commissary and base exchange. Need more be said?

- Good news on the environment front: a local company has found a source of starch-based, bio-degradable plastic bags that it is trying to market on Saipan. For more information, contact Emmanuel M. Leva, at Rosal/Zest Ent./United Printers, at 234-1187 or e-mail him at eman_leva@yahoo.com.

- Re the Mendiola-Manglona fight for Rota's seat on the CUC Board, how come no one has suggested that Mendiola resign his position as resident director - which would remove the objection that has been made to his serving on the Board?

- Another question: Could it be that no one is pushing for run-off elections in November because no funding has been provided for doing so, and those in charge of appropriating funds aren't

interested in finding any for that purpose?