

On My Mind

4/1/05

Though trying to establish "blame" doesn't really serve any useful purpose, it might, nonetheless, be useful to examine how the La Fiesta mall got to be where it is in the first place. As I recall, it was constructed in conjunction with the Nikko Hotel, and was intended to cater to its guests as well as to serve as drawing card so that other hotels would also be built in that area. That idea, in turn, was supported by the zoning board, which defined that area of Marpi as a commercial zone, suitable for tourist development.</P>

Unfortunately for the Nikko and for the investors in La Fiesta mall and, in my opinion, fortunately for the rest of us, that concept did not succeed. The northern part of Saipan is still relatively green, relatively undeveloped. It retains its beauty, its open vistas, its placid nature. It continues to serve as a great site for outdoor activities, be it competitive motor-cycle sports at Cow Town, Hash-House Harrier runs, or boonie-stomping; to serve as a safe area for joggers as well as for restorative overlooks to the sea at Bird Island; to offer quiet places for healing peace memorials at Banzai, at both the top and bottom of Suicide Cliff.</P>

Before deciding the fate of La Fiesta Mall, which serves as entrance, of sorts, to the Marpi area, it might be wise to consider the impact of whatever use is to be made of that "white elephant" on the rest of Marpi. ("White elephant:" most appropriately defined in my dictionary as "a rare expensive possession that is a financial burden to maintain.") Which, in turn, requires that one consider the future of Marpi per se, and in relation to the Mall.</P>

At present, it appears that one wild idea after another has been thrown out as a possible use for the Mall without any consideration of its impact on its surroundings, or its appropriateness for the suggested use. Among the Mall's many problems - power consumption, maintenance, security - is the lack of a coherent pedestrian traffic flow/pattern within the complex, and the lack of an elevator. (What the designers originally had in mind in creating such a maze remains a puzzle.) However, both coherent traffic flows and one or more elevators would be essential, it seems to me, to any of the uses suggested so far, all of which (classrooms, for example, or a single government agency) call for a high degree of interaction among components, and access by the developmentally disabled.</P>

While it could have a negative impact on the surroundings - unless it were carefully regulated - a more appropriate use might be for activities that are independent of each other - poker parlors and "massage parlors" come to mind. Each of these types of "parlor" operates - at least in theory - independently of the other, and the ability for traffic to flow seamlessly from one to the other is not an issue. Additionally, putting these parlors out there would remove them from the villages and from Garapan's prime tourist area. It could enhance the Hotel Nikko's occupancy rate, though the Nikko might not willingly take on the color of a casino hotel. It might also encourage restaurants to return to the Mall, since, presumably, even those frequenting such parlors must eat at some point or another.</P>

Perhaps a better idea would be to pose the question of what to do with La Fiesta Mall to the

general public - for input from everyone from school children to private businesses to investors and entrepreneurs. It might also serve a useful purpose to pull together an ad hoc task force to establish guidelines as to what would be a productive, useful, appropriate, economically reasonable and environmentally viable function for what is now perhaps the CNMI's biggest white elephant. Hopefully, either - or both - would come up with better ideas than the harebrained schemes that have been emanating from the governor's office to date.</P>

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Another agency that seems to be operating without a perceptible sense of direction is the Marianas Visitors Bureau. Or perhaps it has an internal vision that others do not share. On the one hand, the Hotel Association of the NMI thinks the MVA ought to stop sponsoring local events like the "Taste of the Marianas" and Xterra, and spend more on overseas advertising. On the other hand, the Legislature doesn't seem to think the MVA needs extra funds at all - protesting that providing MVA with more funds will deprive other agencies of needed funding - when, in fact, if extra funding provided MVA did indeed bring in more tourists, other agencies would also reap benefits.</P>

What appears to be lacking is any foundation for the MVA's allocation of funds, or for its arguments as to the rate of return on those allocations. Granted that it is probably rather difficult to prove whether advertising overseas is more cost-effective than sponsoring local events, with little hard data on which to base conclusions, nevertheless, if such findings exist, they are obviously not shared with or understood by others. And if such findings do not exist, effort should be made to obtain them.</P>

Clearly, the CNMI needs something more than a vague advertising of "sun, sea and sky" to draw tourists. Festivities, festivals, sports, are obvious attractions. In my book, the problem with the focus of MVA's tourist campaigns is that it is too shallow. MVA does not do enough to improve or to enhance the product it is selling. Why, for example, does it support "Taste of the Marianas" but not the Flame Tree Arts Festival? MVA appears to operate on the assumption that all it needs to do is advertise the presence of the CNMI; that it has little or nothing to do with, little or no responsibility towards, making sure tourists have flourishing coral reefs and a clean lagoon in which to swim, snorkel and dive; towards making sure tourists have something to do when it rains; towards providing tourists with an understanding of the local culture; towards offering tourists a view of and exposure to the CNMI's history and art; towards helping tourists appreciate and enjoy the flora and fauna of the CNMI's tropical environment....</P>

At present, the MVA is guided by its enabling legislation. This does not provide sufficient leeway for the MVA to do all that it could and should to enhance tourism in the CNMI. It is high time to change the framework, the rationale, the precept within which the MVA decides - or should decide - where to put its efforts, its resources.</P>

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Short takes:

- A reader asked, in a recent letter to the editor, why the NMI Retirement Fund was insisting that those members qualified to do so participate in Medicare when they already have medical coverage under the Fund. What the Fund is doing is trying to save money. If Medicare can foot the

bill for Retirement Fund members' medical expenditures, then the Fund's moneys previously allocated to member medical costs can be stretched further, or turned elsewhere. It's a fine idea - except that it costs the members money too. But it's better than the Fund running out of money and not being able to cover any medical costs for its members.</P>

- Which brings me to the question being asked in the Saipan Tribune's "Opinion meter." It asks whether people would support an increase in taxes if it would boost the revenue of the CNMI government. Perhaps it is worded thus to keep the question short. But I would answer that question with a "no." I am not willing to pay higher taxes simply to boost revenue. But I would be willing to pay a higher tax if it would mean that current needs would be met, and current services improved. Simply boosting revenue - so it can be used willy-nilly, for pork barrel projects, does not appeal to me.</P>

- Another question: when will this process of robbing Peter to pay Paul, as the saying goes, end? Taking money designated for the Kagman watershed project to pay for CHC's dialysis project, for the Agingan treatment plant; taking tobacco settlement funds to cover general fund expenses for the 2006 budget - is that even legal? And how will the original intent of those funds be met, once the funds have been spent for other things? What will be borrowed next, to cover those projects? Where will it all end?</P>

- I hope our Solid Waste Management Program can bring the University of Guam's Dr. Mohhammad Galabi over to the CNMI to present his talk on "Isfahan Waste Management Model: An Alternative to Landfilling," which, according to a report in the Marianas Variety, he gave at a recent environmental science seminar on Guam. According to the report, the city of Isfahan, located in Iran, re-cycles everything from glass, bottles, metal, aluminum, plastic, sheets to organic materials. "They compact organic materials; they press aluminum and melt metals and sell them to companies for other uses," notes the article. With the CNMI landfill filling up so rapidly, more emphasis on and greater facilitation of re-cycling would appear to be badly needed here.</P>

- While a debate on same-sex marriage may not, at first glance, appear to be a fitting topic for a Covenant Day observance - as was done two weeks ago - on second thought, it can be argued that the topic is quite appropriate. It is the Covenant that allies the CNMI with the U.S., and it is that alliance that bring Bill of Rights - including that of free speech - to the CNMI. Using such a controversial subject, which borders on the politically incorrect, for a Covenant Day debate emphasizes that right to freedom of speech. That most debaters were not opposed to same-sex marriage makes the holding of that debate even more significant. All who participated - contestants, coaches, teachers and sponsors- deserve our thanks.</P>