

On My Mind
4/29/05

Democratic gubernatorial candidate 'Roilin Froilan' Tenorio is at it again. On the one hand, he offered some eminently good advice in noting that local political parties should remain neutral instead of aligning themselves with either the Democratic or the Republican national party. According to an article in the Saipan Tribune last week, Tenorio noted that this way the CNMI could continue having good relationships with either party. "We should remain neutral. It's better to be non-affiliated so we can go to [either] party...so we will have no problem asking for help if we need [it]," he said.</P>

But then he turned around and made an outrageous request to the Commonwealth Ports Authority Board, asking that billboards advertising over-the-counter vitamins sold in Japan be allowed along Airport Road. What's more, he wanted the CPA to give the Japanese company an exclusive franchise to advertise not only along the Airport Road but also at the airport itself.</P>

The Japanese representative from the vitamin company explained that it wanted an exclusive franchise because it did not want the airport to be cramped with billboards - which would make the airport ugly, reported a story in the Marianas Variety last week. Indeed.</P>

Wonder if we should read anything into the fact that one paper published a positive Tenorio story while on the same day, the other published a more negative one?</P>

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Almost more outrageous was the CPA response to Tenorio's request. According to the Variety story, the CPA board agreed to give approval in principle to Tenorio's proposal! Saipan's Airport road gives visitors their first impression of the CNMI. It is a particularly lovely one when the flame trees are all in bloom, and the road offers, at all times of the year, broad vistas of groomed greenery - suggesting that the CNMI values the natural beauty of its islands. This CPA is considering defacing with billboards? Billboards no doubt written in Japanese, and thus incomprehensible to everyone else who arrives on Saipan? Commercial billboards - advertising a product rather than promoting the islands? Advertising a product one can't even buy in the CNMI at that?</P>

CPA Director Carlos H. Shoda explained, according to the article, that the board gave only approval in principle because CPA would have to first determine whether a bidding process would be required, and whether awarding an exclusive franchise would violate agreements with DFS - which holds, in effect, an exclusive franchise for merchandise retail at the airport.</P>

Let us hope that this inane, insane, idea is squelched promptly and thoroughly before anyone else gets carried away with the counterproductive idea that making money through exclusive billboard advertising franchises is good for the CNMI!</P>

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While on the subject of making money, the Department of Interior is to be applauded for its on-going efforts to help find businesses willing to invest in the CNMI. A group, facilitated by

the DOI Office of Insular Affairs is scheduled to visit the CNMI in mid-May.</P>

A book I've just finished reading, "One Small Step Can Change Your Life," raises the question, however, of whether the CNMI isn't over-looking, ignoring, any number of smaller steps it could take to help the economy, to raise revenue, rather than looking to more massive-scale solutions. The book, by Robert Maurer, proposes that following "the Kaizen way" - of one small step at a time - is a far better, more effective, means of actually achieving one's goals than the ambitious resolves to make big changes (like losing 25 pounds) which often fail, and fall far short of accomplishment. Maurer suggests eating one less spoonful of cereal or dessert as a way of starting a diet, rather than swearing off sweets and desserts altogether, or writing only three sentences a day instead of setting aside several hours, as a way of starting work on a journal, or a novel.</P>

Thus, rather than hoping a big developer will be found who will immediately improve our economy, the CNMI might more fruitfully take smaller steps more likely succeed, to generate revenue more quickly. For example, tighter controls on poker machine operations and closer inspection of winnings is bound to generate revenue not now going into CNMI coffers. Improving collections of utility payments, of medical payments due, of motor vehicle licensing fees would do the same. As would better control and collection of garment factory fees and taxes, enforcement of all revenue-generating provisions already enacted into law.</P>

A not-yet invoked source of revenue is imposition of a small fee for all scuba divers; if defined as going toward protection of the marine environment hardly any one of them would protest, since they'd all be interested in maintaining pristine diving conditions. Another is the prostitution industry. Bishop Camacho notwithstanding, the industry is bound to stay. It would be much more intelligent to acknowledge as much, and to regulate it as an industry, requiring licenses (a prime revenue source) as well as health inspections (another revenue source). All of which would be much easier to control and manage - and be far more pleasing to the rest of the tourists - if an area, a single hotel, outside the immediate Garapan area, were set aside as the only premises where such activity was permitted.</P>

Another relatively small-scale endeavor is making the port more friendly to visiting tour boats and military vessels. Booths could be built, and rented out at arrival times, that would offer local foods, local produce, local CDs, tourist information, car rentals, t-shirts and souvenirs (let's hope they'd NOT be those ugly crushed coral, or resin things, cheap goods made in the PI!). Not only would there be revenue from the rental of the booths, but from sales as well.</P>

Then of course, there's the obvious solution of down-sizing government, of reducing the ranks of over-paid and under-productive government employees.....</P>

Given the very simple, and elementary, steps that the CNMI could take to reduce its expenses, to improve its revenue picture, it is all the more surprising that Department of Interior doesn't demand some sort of quid pro quo before offering more help.</P>

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There's more wrong with the Paseo de Marianas than just the lack of parking spaces and the presence of prostitutes. The pedestrian mall in the middle of Garapan also lacks shade. In

mid-day, the concrete-covered area absorbs heat and turns the place into an oven. At night, the concrete releases the heat, and the place is still hot. And it's dusty besides. No one is willing to offer out-door café amenities, and put chairs and tables outside because of the dust.</P>

If the planners had used more grass and greenery, both heat and dust could have been absorbed, making the area more inviting - as a children's play area, in general - as well as keeping it cooler. The mosaics may be pretty, and grass will require water, but as its present lifelessness attests, the present design isn't working.</P>

Will the process of turning the Fiesta Mall into a school fare any better? In the first place, the proposal is to use only the middle of the three buildings at La Fiesta as a school. What tenants will want to lease space on either side of hundreds of junior and high school students? Will the Public School System be give a say on who its neighbors will be? How will students cope with windowless classrooms? What will they use as sports facilities? What about all the landscap-ing?</P>

And the governor has said the administration will pay for re-modelling? Has anyone scoped out those costs yet? Where will the money come from? What if the governor isn't re-elected and his successor doesn't support the idea of using the mall for classrooms?</P>

After the spectacular failure of the Paseo design, what assurance is there that the Fiesta re-design will be any more successful?</P>

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Short takes:

- Granted that the CNMI needs new sources of revenue, but Marianas Public Lands Authority proposal to charge Verizon for underground cables crossing public lands sounds much more like harassment than revenue generation, given the administration's recent cancellation of Verizon cell phones in particular and its seeming pettiness in dissing Verizon in general.</P>

In the first place, why wasn't the issue raised during negotiations of the sale of the company? Why only now? In the second place, such charges have not been levied before, yet plenty of underground cable already crosses public lands. The precedent is not in MPLA's favor. That the House has caved in to MPLA's pressure and withdrawn its bill to waive such fees is distressing, to say the least. MPLA's histrionic defense of public lands use notwithstanding, the idea makes no sense whatsoever. And in the third place, does this issue, perchance, belong more appropriately to the Telecommunications Commission than to MPLA?</P>

- CNMI's public radio station KRNM garnered about \$900 from 21 supporters in its latest fund drive. Station manager Carl Pogue said the station would have to drop some programming due to the lack of support. Want to be sure your favorite programs continue? Support the station! Call Carl at 234-5766, or send him a check at KRNM-NMC, P.O. Box 501250, Saipan, MP 96950. It's not too late....</P>

- It's an on-going struggle trying to decide whom to support in the up-coming elections, given the ever-changing picture of candidate strengths and weaknesses. I've about decided that, for

governor, I'm going to go with the one who will do the least harm, create the least damage - not that that's such an easy decision either!</P>

"One of the core reasons products cost so much and hurt the environment so much is that we're plundering the earth's resources to produce single-use, one-way products that go from use to tip." Jeff Angel, director of Total Environment Center, in Sydney, Australia - in April-June issue of Australian Geographic

- It's a good thing that the CNMI's vegetation is so hardy, its climate so hospitable. The Commonwealth Utilities Corporation just slaughters growth near its power lines. But fortunately, it all grows back, covering the scars, replacing the dead limbs with new ones, restoring habitat. Environmental week.....