

On My Mind

5/27/05

As the Marianas Visitors Bureau and the office of the governor scramble to counteract the apparent intention by Japanese Air Lines to discontinue all its flights to Saipan, it would appear that another player who should be in the picture is not. Nowhere has there been mention that the Commonwealth Ports Authority be included in the meetings with JAL and Japanese officials. Yet as was brought out in the Chamber of Commerce economic summit held just last week, CPA also plays a role in bringing tourists to the CNMI, and ought to be included in developing strategies for increasing tourist traffic.</P>

Just as the Commonwealth Development Authority has it in its power to abate taxes for developers through its Qualifying Certificate Program - even if the program isn't working as it was intended - so the CPA has it in its power to lower the fees and charges levied against airlines that use its terminal facilities. Perhaps some temporary compromise can be worked out while fuel costs are at a premium to entice JAL to continue flying to Saipan?</P>

While Carlos H. Salas, CPA executive director, has said that CPA was willing to implement its common use terminal equipment (CUTE) in phases, nonetheless, that CPA is implementing it at all in the face of JAL's impending withdrawal, and the objection of both Northwest Airlines and Asiana, is disturbing. It is not as though the CNMI were in a position to impose conditions on airlines serving the CNMI. On the contrary, the CNMI is more dependent than ever on the airlines to bring in additional tourists, and therefore additional revenue. One would think the CNMI, and the CPA as an agency of the CNMI, would be doing all it could to encourage the airlines to increase their flights here, instead of setting up more obstacles - in the way of higher fees - to their doing so.</P>

How does that saying go about the biggest handicap being attitudes? Maybe CPA needs to change its attitude - and realize that if it increases its gains at the expense of the CNMI as a whole, it too will eventually lose?</P>

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Another area where a change of attitude or approach might be useful is the promotion of the CNMI as a regional education and training center. Though recent events, like the failure of Saipan University and Northern Marianas College former president Ken Wright's overly ambitious vision (it never jelled as a plan) may have tainted the concept, the idea is still sound. Even Wali Osman, an economist now with the Department of Interior Insular Affairs Office, suggested that an ideal "industry" for the CNMI would be providing education and training to students from Asia. Education is known as a clean industry, and while it increases demands on the infrastructure because it increases the population of the islands, it is not a polluting one, and does not necessarily demand large investments of capital.</P>

As it now stands, however, decisions as to which educational services will be offered in the CNMI, and according to what criteria, remains in the hands of NMC's Board of Regents. While the original rules and regulations NMC proposed for doing so were, thankfully, rejected by the Office of the Attorney General's Office and are presumably undergoing revision, the frame of

reference exhibited by NMC's Board - as reflected in the originally proposed rules and regs - is very restrictive. The Board, I was told, was practically paranoid in its efforts to avoid another Saipan University debacle.</P>

This attitude, however, is not conducive to the development of any kind of education "industry" in the CNMI. If the CNMI is to take a more assertive stance in soliciting investors to the islands - one of the recommendations of the Chamber of Commerce' recent economic summit - paranoid-flavored regulations are not the answer. A more appropriate role for government in promoting development and encouraging investors would be to identify and define needs and opportunities as well as available resources, and to provide guidelines and/or standards within which developers and investors would be expected to operate, rather than to impose burdensome and repressive specifications as did the original proposed rules and regs.</P>

Thus, a much broader perspective is called for in establishing the parameters within which educational institutions would be expected to operate. While the CNMI Constitution states that the mission of NMC shall be to provide educational opportunities "for the purpose of improving the quality of life for the individual and for the Commonwealth as a whole," it could be argued that promoting and accommodating education as an industry aimed at Asian students does not fit that condition, and that therefore, control of such an industry could legitimately be established outside of the control of NMC.</P>

It may not need to come to that. But if NMC's Board of Regents does not undergo a major change of attitude, it might. At issue is a major potential source of additional revenue for the CNMI. It requires positive, creative and supportive salesmanship. If NMC's Board is not up to the challenge, other means of meeting the challenge will need to be found.</P>

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I wrote, not long ago, about tourism being everyone's business - that we all depend on its earnings, and therefore should all be concerned about its survival. In light of the complaints by the Department of Lands and Natural Resources - recently given responsibility for the maintenance of tourism sites - that it does not have the funds to provide adequate security for them, and in light of the vandalism that has recently been reported, maybe it's time to form a "Friends of Tourist Sites"? It's probably too much to expect people to volunteer to stand guard all night at all the tourist sites, but it might not be too much to expect them to volunteer to cut the grass, or pick up trash, or clean up the graffiti. And it might not be too much to expect them to conduct fund-raisers so that security guards for vulnerable sites could be hired.</P>

One could take classes of school kids out to the sites to do clean-up - as Sam McPhetres did when his NMC students cleaned up the Japanese hospital site earlier this year. But rather than an occasional clean-up under one public-minded professor, how about regularly scheduling such clean-ups as a substitute for part of the physical education requirement in the high schools? Or as a combined project for local history and phys ed students? To the extent that the vandalism is done by school-age kids, that might even help to reduce the vandalism in the first place.</P>

Whether responsibility for tourism sites more logically belongs to the Marianas Visitors Authority or to the DLNR is, of course, open to question. But regardless of who is in charge,

some body needs to do something!</P>

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Catch-up:

- I neglected to mention, in connection with last week's story about my problems with the Bank of Guam web page, that I was called the following Monday by a very nice person on Guam, who thanked me for identifying the problems, and assured me that within a month, Bank of Guam's web page would sport noticeable improvement. She even sent a follow-up e-mail in confirmation.</P>

- While the governor might have thought it would bring him closer to his audience to use a lectern on the floor rather than the podium on the stage for giving his state of the Commonwealth speech the other day, what it did instead was make him less visible to more of the audience, erasing much of the presumed sought-after effect.</P>

- This past February, I complained about the lack of convenient access to the Commonwealth Register on-line. One had no choice but to download the entire thing. I don't know when the improvement was made, but now the AG's web site not only provides the table of contents, but also lets one download the listed items separately. A great improvement!

Thank-you! The Register is available at www.cnmiago.gov.mp/.</P>

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Short takes:

- It would appear that the mainland media is already so intimidated that it can't see the forest for the trees. Nowhere have I seen notice that the state with the largest gain in the proposed Base ReAlignment and Closure (BRAC) plan, by far, is the state of Texas, with a gain of more than 35,000 military personnel. Oddly enough, the second highest is Georgia, with a gain of 15,136. No other state's figures reach the five-digit mark. Is that suspect, or what?</P>

- While we all look forward to the benefits to be derived from China's rapid growth and development, it might be well to bear in mind what one of the speakers at last week's Chamber of Commerce economic summit pointed out as a possible "bump in the road." James Staub, Senior Vice President of Atlanta Sosnoff Capital was cautioning the audience that things don't always go as planned, and listed several possible "bumps in the road" ahead - one of which was that China could, for one reason or another, just shut down again, which would, in turn, have a significant impact on world trade as well as CNMI's tourism projections. As they say, "To be forewarned is to be forearmed."</P>

- I've been told that current maps of Iraq, for example, are available to the local media only upon payment of extra fees to the news bureaus. Still, I am getting lost in the accounts of battles at strange-sounding places there. It would be helpful to be able to picture whether they are all in one area, or spread throughout the country, or..... Is there perhaps an amateur geographer available who could provide his or her own sketch for our edification?</P>

- An artist's rendition of what the proposed new cultural center in Garapan would look like is on display in Arts Council Director Rob Hunter's office. The center's blank walls, small windows, and various height roofs more closely resemble a prison, or one of those characterless federal

buildings in Washington, D.C., than anything at all welcoming, or appropriate to the CNMI's tropical setting, its cultural heritage. Let's hope it is not too late to change.....</P> .