

On My Mind

6/3/05

I'm not sure there's ever going to be a way to do this legally - on the basis of a law that has passed both houses and been signed by the governor - but perhaps it can be done through public awareness and public pressure, and that is to establish minimum education and experience requirements for island legislators. After all, the CNMI requires nurses to pass the NCLEX exam. It requires physicians to meet board requirements. It requires attorneys to pass the local bar exam. It has begun requiring teachers to pass the PRAXIS exam. Engineers must pass licensing requirements, as must certified public accountants.</P>

So isn't it about time that the CNMI require its legislators - who pass the laws requiring everyone else to be professionally certified - to be "professionally" certified as well? At present, all that is required is that candidates for the House be qualified to vote in the Commonwealth, be at least 21 years of age, and be a resident and domiciliary of the Commonwealth for at least three years immediately preceding the date on which they take office. To be candidate for Senate, the same requirements exist, except the person must be at least 25 years of age, a resident and domiciliary for at least five years - and both must be registered to vote in the precinct or district where they are a candidate.</P>

While a cursory search of the web did not come up with anything substantive about education requirements for mainland legislators, common sense would suggest that, particularly given the range of issues legislators typically deal with, the minimum requirement - implicitly if not explicitly - is a degree from a four-year college. In the CNMI, what with the limited options for obtaining a four-year degree, such an expectation may be unrealistic. But it does not seem unrealistic to expect that every legislative candidate hold at least a two-year degree. Though given Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs David Cohen's speech last month at Northern Marianas College graduation - in which he said that a two-year degree is like half-time at a sports event - perhaps that minimum, at least for all future candidates - should be set at graduation from a four-year college.</P>

In addition to the minimum of a college degree, it would not seem unrealistic to also require that legislative candidates have spent some time off-island - not just a couple of days shopping on Guam or in the Philippines, but long enough to gain an informed perspective on the place of the CNMI on the world stage, and in relation to the rest of the United States. Whether there should also be a qualifying exam is yet another issue....</P>

Will legislators introduce bills establishing such requirements? Not likely. But voters can effect such requirements through their choice of candidate. And the media can help by providing information on the educational level each of the candidates has attained.</P>

Legislators should not really expect more of others than they do of themselves. Particularly in light of the many complex issues faced by today's legislators, expecting that they are adequately educated and informed should not be too much to ask.</P>

Nor is the intention here to pick only on legislators. All CNMI elected officials, if not also all agency heads and board members, should be required to meet the same criteria - for much the same reason.</P>

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Contrary to the opinion expressed by one observer, it is an over-simplification, to say the least, to claim that the bail-out of Japanese investors in the CNMI "is attributable to Japan's financial mess." On the contrary, knowledgeable sources offer a litany of reasons, from the unreliability of power and problems with the water supply, the inconsistency of applicable laws and regulations in regard to investments, labor, and immigration, and the laxity of enforcement of what laws are passed, to violations of federal health and safety standards, purse snatchings and other personal safety concerns, and the visual blight of litter, vandalism and graffiti - not to mention the prostitution, the poker parlors, the personal assaults from those who would force handbills on the passer-by. All of which, it should be noted, are not new complaints, but problems of many years' standing.</P>

Unhappiness has also been expressed, as related in Frank S. Rosario's story, "Sayonara to the CNMI: Big Japan Investors Leaving in Drove," in the April issue of Pacific Magazine that the CNMI has done little to encourage and support those who have already invested in the CNMI. The focus has always been on luring new investors to the Marianas. As Yoshiro Kishimoto, general manager of Coral Ocean Point Resort, is quoted as saying, "The (CNMI) government never protects current (foreign) investors....Yet they keep asking for new investors to come in."</P>

However, not until Japan Air Lines also announced its intention of pulling out of the CNMI - of ceasing all scheduled flights - was there perceptible action on the part of any CNMI officials to do anything about the departure of its Japanese investors - the sell-out of their hotels, golf resorts, merchandise outlets. No one seemed to notice, or to care. Or they expressed puzzlement, but not concern. There was no identification of possible causes, no attempt to begin to improve conditions, no dialogue with departing investors.</P>

The JAL announcement, however, created tremendous concern and shortly thereafter, the governor himself led an entourage to Japan, to plead with JAL officials. As if JAL alone could solve the problems of declining Japanese interest in the Marianas. What does not yet seem to have occurred to CNMI officials is that it will take more than scheduled flights to the CNMI to regain a greater presence of Japanese investors - and tourists - here.</P>

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Nor will attempts to off-set the absence of JAL by entreating other airlines, other countries, to bring their tourists to the CNMI have much long-term effect until there is evidence of substantive improvement in addressing and resolving the underlying problems.</P>

The problems are multiple. They affect many areas and it will require a host of different strategies to find solutions. Though at first glance it might appear that implementing solutions will require a massive injection of funding, a closer look suggests that maybe part of the answer lies in simply re-allocating personnel. Take some of the padded staff in executive and legislative offices, and put them on the streets - monitoring the Paseo, cleaning the litter and

graffiti, supplementing the presence of police in Garapan as civil patrols to deter purse snatching and solicitation. That, at least, would create a good first impression.</P>

Curing other problems will take longer, but is no less necessary. As has been said in this column many times, there is a need to improve the product if the CNMI wants to increase tourism traffic. Regulatory issues must be addressed, concerns of existing investors must be acted on, solutions to environmental hazards must be pursued. Overcoming infrastructure shortcomings must continue to be given high priority.</P>

In addition to additional funding and/or appropriate staffing, solutions will also require strong leadership, backbone and resolve - something voters might want to remember when they cast their ballots in November.</P>

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Indicative of the situation, in some sense, is the big sign posted near the frequently over-flowing sewer lift station across from the church - and right near the beach - in Tanapag. The large wooden sign has printed across the top in large letters "Relocation of T-1 Lift Station," - something Tanapag residents have been promised for many months. A "design/build contractor" is identified, as well as a consulting engineer. But none of the blanks are filled in. There is no contract number provided. There is no start date identified. Nor is there a completion date given. Just the promise - so far, still an empty one.</P>

Good intentions are not enough. Promises do not resolve problems.</P>

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Short Takes:

- With the not unexpected news, appearing on the front page of today's Saipan Tribune, that revenue from user fees has dropped below \$2 million for the first time in ten years - which obviously results in yet less revenue for the CNMI - one question that comes to my mind is: Just what will it take to persuade the legislature that some form of sales tax is a viable source of revenue? One that nearly every other state in the union already has in place?</P>

- Another question: Has anyone ever done an analysis of how and why overtime is accumulated? Of whether a change in staffing patterns - so that after-hour needs are met by staggered schedules, for example - wouldn't off-set much of the overtime being claimed?</P>

- And yet another: do estimates of the "ripple effect" of the garment industry on revenue take into account remittances - which send money off-island that could have been spent here?</P>

- I was gratified to see that not all schools required caps and gowns of students who completed their final year to move on to the next level, that not all schools called such a promotion, if you will, "graduation." The sight of six-and-under youngsters in particular in cap and gown reflects such profligacy!</P>

- It's not clear whether network server SAIPAN.COM is just suffering growing pains, or whether its recent seemingly endless spate of problems is indicative of something more serious. At least it's turned the fielding of technical service phone calls over to the Guam offices. Instead of a

frustrating non-responsive recording, especially in the evening - and on week-ends, when problems inevitably occur - there's now this live voice on the other end of the phone - one that is exceedingly polite and helpful, and satisfyingly creative, knowledgeable. It helps.</P>