

## On My Mind

7/29/05

In going through three weeks' accumulation of back issues of the <EM>Saipan Tribune</EM> and the <EM>Marianas Variety</EM> - and I've not yet finished - among the items that caught my interest were the responses published in the July 7 issue of the <EM>Trib</EM> to that week's "FreeFire" question: "What are the top three environmental concerns in the CNMI and how should they be addressed?"</P>

Unbelievably, two of the five respondents said they didn't see much of a problem! All five did say they thought that littering and garbage disposal were of environmental concern. But not one mentioned pollution of the lagoon, perhaps Saipan's most crucial environmental problem, since the lagoon's no-longer-so-pristine waters are a major drawing card in its pitch to tourists - its second-largest source of revenue. Not one raised the issues of inadequate sewer outfalls, rain-water run-off, over-harvesting of fish and shellfish, over-use of inshore waters, or careless dumping of shipboard debris - all of which contribute to lagoon pollution.</P>

Nor did anyone mention the on-going degradation of the CNMI's coral reefs- due both to reasons mentioned above and to destruction by uncaring divers, fishermen, boatmen. Our no-longer-quite-so-healthy-coral reefs are, of course, another major drawing card for tourists - and thus also vital to the CNMI's economy.</P>

Nor did anyone mention the importance of habitat preservation, on land or in the water - the need to protect endangered species and ensure that more do not become endangered. Or the need to re-cycle more waste. Or the problem of air pollution.</P>

If the five people quoted in the article are at all typical - and it should be noted that while three "concerns" were asked for, only one of the five could come up with more than one - it is clear that more work needs to be done to sensitize the community to the full nature and extent of environmental problems in the CNMI, and to their importance to the CNMI's economic survival.  
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Another item that caught my attention was the list of "FAQ's" - that is, Frequently Asked Questions - that Associate Justice Alex C. Castro posed and answered in the July 20 issue of the <EM>Tribune</EM>. Judges and justices who are up for retention face a difficult situation. People will vote on whether or not they should continue to serve, but the judges and justices are not allowed to campaign or to solicit votes in any way. In theory, individual members of the public may comment - and in the past they have done so - but that too could be risky if anyone thought there was a connection between the member of the public and the judge or justice in question.</P>

Justice Castro has come up with a creative way of putting the issue before the public, in a most professional manner. There is nothing in what is contained in the Q and A's that relates to him personally - it is all impartial, objective, and informative. In fact, future members of the judiciary - or perhaps, future editors - could well re-run the complete list as public information the next time a judge or justice is up for retention.</P>

I would only note that it is a pity Justice Castro did not consult with the two other members of the judiciary up for retention: Chief Justice Miguel S. Demapan and Associate Justice David A. Wiseman, and issue the list of questions in all their names. Or, perhaps he did, and they demurred? I guess one can only speculate.....</P>

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The reports of a presentation made by businessman James Thomas to the Saipan Rotary Club on the subject of vocational education also caught my eye. Thomas is reported to have said he sees no need to offer such things as post graduate degrees in business on island "because this is not your corporate America." On the other hand, he is quoted as saying, so far as he knows, there are only two certified local electricians on island. Why? Because courses in the technical professions are not offered, there is no local certification process, and present pay scales do not support local technical professionals in any case.</P>

Thomas' remarks make an excellent argument for raising the minimum wage; it could help "our young people out of high school to get vocational training and keep them here" - as well as reduce the reliance on foreign workers - but, sad to state, his argument has not surfaced - or was not noted - in the reports of this past week's legislative hearing on increasing the minimum wage.

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Speaking of which, it is "so tiresome," as a friend put it, that discussion of such an important issue would deteriorate into political mud-slinging - as did the governor's testimony on the issue. Instead of offering reasoned discourse, intelligent analysis, constructive alternatives, or support in principle if nothing else, the governor' statement, which he delivered in person, sounded like a campaign speech. According to media reports, it did not focus on the issue, but instead found fault throughout with House member Heinz Hofschneider, who introduced the bill, and with House Speaker Fitial - both of whom are also candidates for governor in the upcoming election.</P>

Raising the minimum wage from \$3.05 to \$5/hr in one step may be too difficult for businesses to absorb, but surely, a staged increase is long over-due? It also would seem to make more sense to adopt the Chamber's proposal for a tiered system, than to exempt certain industries altogether. Among other things, doing so in the construction industry, for example, would only perpetuate the CNMI's dependence on foreign workers, rather than provide opportunities for training and advancement in such industries for members of the local community.</P>

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I was disappointed to see so little coverage given to the speech given by Department of Interior's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs David Cohen at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Pacific Educational Conference in Majuro earlier this month. Though copies of the full text of his speech were sent to all media on island, I have not come across a single mention other than the report by Marshall Islands journalist Giff Johnson in the 7/18 issue of the

<EM>Variety</EM>.</P>

Yet it was an important address. In it, Cohen issued a major challenge - aimed not only at students, but also their parents and family. He contrasted an island student, who gave up funds he was saving for college so they could be used for a celebration of his father's being named an island chief - and then never did go on to college - with an Asian student, whose family came over to the states for the express purpose of cooking and otherwise caring for him while he studied for his finals.</P>

"Like it or not, we live in an interconnected global economy, where those who are educated will get farther and farther ahead, and those who are not will get further and further behind. The Pacific, as a whole, is already far behind, and sadly, it is not catching up," he warned.</P>

Using island images, and quoting from the speech he had given to the graduates of Northern Marianas College earlier this year, he described a college education in terms of getting a tattoo, repeating that it is considered shameful not to finish a tattoo. "We will know we finished the tattoo," his speech concludes, "...when we can say that all of the <EM>parents</EM> have Zero Tolerance for the squandering of their children's education money—the parents of Chuuk, parents throughout the FSM, parents in Palau, parents in the Northern Marianas, parents in Guam, parents in American Samoa, parents in Hawaii, parents here in the Marshalls and throughout the Pacific. And ... when we can say that parents throughout the Pacific are as committed to their children's education as parents in Singapore and Japan, and that parents have Zero Tolerance for landowners who take back school property out of greed, for teachers who don't show up, and for children who don't graduate. The day that we can say all of <EM>that</EM>, ladies and gentlemen, is the day that we can say that we've finished our tattoo."</P>

It was an ardent, vivid, powerful speech. It deserved far more attention.</P>

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Then there was the letter to the editor in the July 4 issue of the <EM>Variety</EM>, asking why retirees have not gone up to Capitol Hill to protest the fact that they have yet to receive their Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) that was due to go into effect on January 1 of this year.</P>

I cannot speak for the others, but as a retiree myself, I would answer that this way: Monetarily speaking, the CNMI is in a mess. There's not enough money to properly fund the Public School System, the public health system, the public safety system, the retirement system. There's not enough money to pay for fuel for the power plant, to pay vendors, to pay for overdue raises. Sure, I could use the extra money the COLA represents, but I don't know where the money would come from. There isn't enough to go around as it is. Besides, other shortages are more pressing than mine. And yes, it is, in a sense, a tax that I, as a retiree, am paying that others don't have to (except those due pay raises). But I'd rather do that than do without a retirement check altogether, or do without power, the limited health service that does exist, the police presence that is out there.</P>

I could, of course, go up to Capitol Hill and protest that neither the legislature nor the administration is doing enough to cut costs, to live within its budget, to spend wisely, but given that neither the legislature nor the administration is going to do much between now and November in any

case, what's the point? Maybe next spring.....</P>

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The reports of the last-minute attempt by the Chamber of Commerce to collect enough signatures to put an initiative on the ballot limiting poker parlors to Garapan, Beach and Middle Road also caught my eye. Personally, I'm glad it failed - the thought of Beach Road lined with poker parlors is just too appalling. Nor does leaving the parlors in Garapan help efforts to make Garapan a family-friendly destination.</P>

Yet Chamber Executive Director Chris Parke said the initiative attracted a lot of interest and support throughout the island. Too bad that does not appear to have been enough to push the legislature to take action on its own.</P>