

On My Mind

8/26/05

Further information I've received as to whether the use of heavy fuel oil would lower the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation's fuel costs - as discussed in last week's column - reveals that four of the generators at CUC were originally designed to burn heavy fuel, but were switched to the lighter diesel because of the high maintenance costs. In the long run, however, so goes the information, this did and does not save money because those engines now cannot generate as much power as they would have using heavy fuel oil, and as a result an additional costly generator - along with its added cost of fuel, maintenance, etc. - is required to make up for the loss of output from the original four.</P>

Another realization that has come forth is that the power losses, be they due to tampering with meters and hook-ups, line losses, or the use of incorrect multipliers in the billing process, won't get resolved by turning power generation over to the private sector. The losses occur in the distribution system, which would still be operated by CUC. With losses said to amount to several million dollars, seems like it would be at least as cost-effective to privatize the distribution system as the generation system.</P>

It's not likely CUC will correct the distribution problems since much of the loss is said to be due not so much to poor maintenance and upkeep as it is to politics and favoritism. CUC/this administration would no doubt find it near impossible to go after customers whom they've allowed to abuse the system up til now. Presumably, a private contractor would not be similarly swayed or intimidated.</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

It is disheartening that neither the present nor the past director of CUC - who is now a candidate for lieutenant governor with the Covenant Party - has made any effort to clarify such issues. It would appear that the aforesaid past director, Timothy P. Villagomez, is far more interested in catering to the voters by frenetically coming up with one idea or another for doing away with the fuel surcharge, than he is with improving operations at CUC.</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

Speaking of which, thanks to the governor's late arrival, and a prior commitment on my part, I could not stay for the question portion of the governor's briefing on CUC held earlier this week. I had several but the main question I wanted to ask was: With the rolling power outages due to poor generator maintenance, and the poor generator maintenance due to poor management, what if anything does the governor intend to do to improve management so that over the long term, proper maintenance of the power plant generators does not again become an issue?</P>

I would also have asked, "Given the need to conserve energy, why is it that the multi-purpose civic center is always so cold?"</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

Still on the subject of power and power outages: While Saipan has suffered its share of traffic accidents over the last several weeks, it is sheer luck that none of them have been due to non-working traffic lights. Clearly, drivers have been incredibly considerate of one another. Nonetheless, the government is taking a huge risk in not taking positive, preventive action to

ensure that accidents do not occur when the power goes out, and the lights fail. Since the timing of the power outages is known in advance, it should not be all that difficult to schedule someone to direct traffic at those times.</P>

In all likelihood, a shortage of personnel at the Department of Public Safety is partially to blame for the failure to take preventive action. But aren't there other sources of staffing for such assignments? Couldn't the junior ROTC members be trained to direct traffic? Or police cadets? Or fire division staff? Saipan has been assured that the rolling power outages will come to an end next month, but in the meantime, in the spirit of "better safe than sorry," it behooves those responsible to take action, and staff those traffic crossings!</P>

***</P>

On a related subject: With fuel costs so high - for private automobiles as well as power plant generators - another energy-savings measure that bears looking at is the idea of mass transit. Some people, at least, are seriously considering smaller cars, and less driving, because the cost of gas is so high. So it would seem reasonable to believe that some people would even be willing to consider using mass transit instead of their cars - if a convenient system were in place.</P>

One has only to look as far as Hawaii to recognize that public transit systems can and do work, provided they are properly designed. Oahu's seems very much properly designed - one can go almost anywhere on that island, at almost any time, and at reasonable cost, using only the island's bus system.</P>

There are any number of large commercial-type buses already on island. They travel between major commercial areas already - and most of the time, so far as one can tell - the busses are half empty. They could easily be used to provide the backbone for an island-wide transit system in some sort of public/private partnership arrangement. It might put some taxi drivers out of business were Saipan to establish an effective bus system. But on the other hand, at least some of them should be able to qualify for the additional drivers that would be necessary to operate such a system.</P>

For less populated areas, smaller vehicles could be used - even mini-vans. Not every route needs a huge bus. In fact, in some areas, maybe an on-call system would be more cost-effective, much as is now done with the transportation of elderly and handicapped.</P>

Yes, public transportation systems have been tried before, in a number of different styles, and have failed. But this time the pressure of high gas costs just might be enough to have it succeed. The secret - and the challenge - lies in designing a system that would be versatile, creative, flexible enough, to meet local needs.</P>

***</P>

Although election day is still more than two months away, it is perhaps not too early to take a stand on the issue of whether or not to call for yet another constitutional convention - which will be on the November ballot along with the question of judicial confirmations and the full range of elected positions.</P>

Unfortunately, this issue of whether or not another constitutional convention should be called

was proposed by the 2nd Constitutional Convention and approved during the 1985 general election; even more unfortunately, the amendment required that the question of be put to the voters every ten years. This implies that the CNMI Constitution is an impermanent document, meant to be altered on a regular and on-going basis. The implication weakens the Constitution, the powers it authorizes, the responsibilities it assigns, the functions and structures it provides. In effect, it says, "Don't like what the Constitution says? Just wait ten years..."</P>

The CNMI has enough problems trying to maintain a sense of permanence, consistency and reliability as it is. Its legislature is notorious for amending and/or repealing laws it has passed to accommodate pressures of the moment - be they real or imagined. As a result, investors are already reluctant to start new ventures - because they can never be sure that the conditions in place when they started will remain in place as their project matures.</P>

What the CNMI needs is a greater sense of stability, not yet another opportunity to change things around. Ordinarily, this sense of stability is provided by a constitution, which is defined as a system of fundamental laws and principles that prescribe the nature, function, and limits of a government. Which is why it should be viewed as something 'not to be messed with,' except to bring about fundamental changes.</P>

Granted, the question is only, "Should another concon be held?" But the problem is that most people see it as an opportunity too tempting to pass up. And once delegates gather, the temptation to make changes - regardless of the need thereof - simply because the opportunity is there, appears to become irresistible. Ideally, the amendment which calls for a vote on a constitutional convention should be repealed. But since that would take a constitutional convention, the more practical step is simply to vote "NO" to the question of whether a constitutional convention should be called. There are, after all, other ways to amend the Constitution.</P>

<P align=center>***</P>

Short Takes:

- The Marianas Visitors Bureau has proposed that fees be charged for admission to the grotto as a means of funding upkeep of the area. As was noted here last week, getting "consumers" to pay for what they use is a good idea in principle. It makes them more appreciative. In terms of the grotto, one would hope that the fees would also be used to limit the number of people allowed into the water below. The grotto area has already lost coral due to heavy diver traffic; to retain its attractiveness, it must be protected by controlling access, as is being done - with no loss of tourists - in Hanauma Bay on Oahu.</P>

- A recent National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration report states that Farallon de Medinilla is eroding as a result of the constant military bombing exercises conducted on the island. As people say nowadays, "Duh." What else did anyone expect?</P>

- Does anyone have any data on whether past hosts to the Micronesian Games have shown a net profit? Seems kind of rash for the CNMI to take on playing host next year given its present economic condition, the shortfall in CIP funding....</P>

- The governor's lifting of the homestead moratorium may not be rash, but it is short-sighted -

and blatantly political. A true leader should be working on ways to end the homestead program - instead of holding out false hopes that everyone eligible will be accommodated.</P>