

On My Mind

9/2/05

By the time most people read this, things will be pretty much back to normal for all but the few who suffered substantive damage from Typhoon Nabi. For the people in Hurricane Katrina's path, however, particularly in New Orleans, nothing is back to normal, and from all reports, won't be back to normal for some time to come. City officials are saying it will be two months or more before the city will begin to function again. An entire city "out" for months on end? Unbelievable!</P>

Though this wasn't the strongest typhoon to have hit the CNMI, still, it is reassuring to note that so few homes were destroyed. The implication is that more and more people are able to afford, and to build, typhoon-proof homes. If only the CNMI could afford to put its power lines underground! Then even the power outages would have been fewer, and shorter.</P>

I am impressed each time a typhoon hits at how quickly the major roads are cleared of debris. It hurts to see the trees go down, or lose their branches - two Norfolk pines went down just along the lagoon shore near my house and the nearby breadfruit trees sure took a beating - but I don't know how one makes such trees more typhoon-proof. At any rate, the work crews do a terrific job of pulling them off the road, cutting them up, carting them away, cleaning up the area so promptly.</P>

But I was dismayed at the vast expanse of the nearby lagoon that turned a muddy brown - almost half-way to the reef-line - as a result of storm-water run-off. It may not be possible to keep trees from getting blown over or losing branches, but it sure is possible to control much more of the storm-water that flows into the lagoon and suffocates the coral, endangers the rest of the lagoon habitants, than is now being done. Where is Tanapag's storm-water run-off diversion plan?</P>
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Troublesome, as well, is the news from Washington, D.C., as reported in an opinion piece in this past Thursday's Saipan Tribune, that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is due to be incorporated into the Homeland security agency, and its function changed to preparing for security emergencies rather than for emergencies due to natural disasters, as is now the case. One can only hope that as FEMA services come into play to help people recover from the devastation in New Orleans, it will serve as a pointed reminder of just what it is that FEMA was designed to do.</P>

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At a recent meeting about Beach Road improvements, the subject of littering came up - as it always does at meetings where the environment is under discussion - and the talk turned to the need to provide more effective, easier, ways to dispose of trash once it is collected. I learned that the original idea of providing transfer stations around Saipan, so that people would not have to take their trash all the way out to the Marpi landfill but could dump them in the transfer stations, has been dropped. Apparently, it was felt that transfer stations are basically unsanitary, as they would attract rats, flies, and other vermin. And no one was willing to have the transfer station located in their neighborhood.</P>

On the other hand, providing house-to-house pick-up of trash would cost less than building and staffing the transfer stations, and should be more effective, since people would only be required to put their trash in suitable containers in front of their house.</P>

The general consensus seemed to be, however, that in order to persuade people to sort their trash for re-cycling at the pick-up point (rather than it being done at the dump), some sort of incentive would have to be provided. Among the suggestions: that those who separated out their glass, cardboard, newspapers, etc., receive the pick-up service for free.</P>

That would provide what is called a "win-win" result - littering would be greatly reduced, and re-cycling would be greatly increased. The question, of course, is how long it will take to put the system together and become operational. Given the litter problem, it can't be too soon!</P>
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Another "win-win" proposal - one that I've not heard discussed except in personal conversation - is aimed at helping small businesses in particular cope with the ups and downs of customer traffic in their stores. The system apparently is practiced on Oahu, which is heavily dependent on tourist traffic for its revenue.</P>

The idea is to charge such stores a reasonable fixed lease/rental rate, with an increase in rate depending on traffic flow. Thus, if a typhoon or power outages or construction cut down on traffic flow, on customers in the store, the store owner would only pay a minimum agreed-to rent or lease amount. But if tourist traffic were heavy, or several military ships arrived for R&R, the store owner would pay an agreed-to percentage of his higher earnings to the landlord, to the rental agency, to the lessor.</P>

It's a win for the "landlord," because he will share the benefit of increased traffic flow. And it's a win for the "tenant" because the tenant does not have to pay a premium rent when traffic flow is low. Moreover, because the landlord knows that the more business his tenant's store does, the more he as landlord will get, the landlord then is inclined to take more interest in how his tenant's business is doing, and even in promoting that business.</P>

It's certainly a model worth looking at for the CNMI, where particularly tourist-based businesses have to contend with a continuing ebb and flow of customer traffic.</P>
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Well, it seems I still don't have it right as to the advantages and disadvantages of burning heavy fuel oil at the power plant. A source has told me said that all eight 8 Mitsubishi engines could run on heavy fuel oil; that they could also run on a combination of heavy fuel oil and diesel fuel oil, they could run on a combination of natural gas, heavy fuel oil and diesel fuel oil; they could even burn methane from sewer treatment plants & waste dumps or even old dirty cooking oil. "That is the nature of ALL Slow to Medium speed large bore diesel engines - regardless of brand name," he said.</P>

In sum, he noted, "HFO = BAD/YUCKY, DFO = BETTER/YUMMY, DFO + GAS =BEST/-MmmmGOOD."</P>

He also said that "...with proper maintenance, rehabilitation and upgrades, the engines can last as long as the 200 Ton chunk of iron that houses it does."</P>

And with that, I think I will withdraw from the discussion. But it should be obvious by now that not everyone knows what they are talking about in discussing the engines at the power plant (me least of all), that maybe the right people aren't being consulted, and that the right answers as to what to do about those engines except in the short term have not yet been reached - or if found, have not yet been made public.</P>

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Another area where the right answer as to what to do about a situation has not yet been reached has to do with taxi service on-island - more particularly with the rates those taxis charge their passengers. Everyone I know complains of the high fares. And now there have come complaints that the military who come to Saipan on R&R also feel the charges are too high. Goodness knows what those tourists who do have occasion to use taxis feel about the charges.</P>

Of course, auto rental companies like the present situation. They provide an alternative to Saipan's visitors that apparently is more economical than taking taxis. The taxi drivers, on the other hand, probably feel they get so few passengers, what with the busses the hotels provide for tourists, that they have to charge high fares just to make ends meet.</P>

Are there too many taxis? If rates were lowered, and more people used taxis, would there be enough? Where is the balance? Should the Department of Commerce be looking at this issue? Or the Marianas Visitors Authority? Or?</P>

The news that a task force on public transportation is to be formed, and that a proposal has been submitted to establish an office of transit authority - as described in a story in this past Wednesday's Tribune - couldn't be more timely. Clearly, study is needed of how to integrate the "public transit" systems now in use - taxis, tour busses, and car rentals - to better serve the tourists, the visiting military, and the residents themselves. Hopefully, the needs and concerns of all parties involved will be given due attention.</P>

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Due attention should also be paid, by all prospective voters in November's election, as to just what the difference is between a constitutional issue and a legal one. More than one of the proposals being suggested as warranting a constitutional convention would be better handled through legislative action.</P>

At issue is not only the stability of the business environment in the CNMI, but the stability of the political and social environment as well. A constitution is meant to serve as the backbone, the skeleton, the basic form, on which entities are created and from which they operate. One does not amputate fingers or arms - or add appendages - lightly or casually, lest they damage the efficiency and effectiveness of the original.</P>

However, change to the "soft tissue" of the body - through legislation, for example - has a less permanent effect, and can often be undone, or re-done, if necessary.</P>

To prevent long-term, permanent harm, great care should be taken to modify the basic framework on which the CNMI is based only when absolutely necessary.</P>