

On My Mind

9/23/05

The long lines at the check-in counter are bad enough. The inability, or refusal - it's not clear which - on the part of the Transportation Security Administration to recognize luggage locks that say they are TSA approved, and cut them off anyway, is worse. Then came TSA's rescission of how packages outgoing from Guam are handled, causing a major bottleneck. But worst of all, it seems to me, is the effect that TSA requirements are having on airline passenger routing.</P>

First came the requirement for people traveling to the states via Osaka to get off the plane in Narita and go through security checks all over again. Then came the requirement that CNMI passengers transiting through Guam to wherever had to get off the plane and go through security checks all over again. And now, the final straw, that people traveling from Hongkong to Guam via Saipan are being forced to get off the plane in Saipan, and here, too, have to go through security checks all over again.</P>

According to a report in this past Wednesday's <EM>Tribune</EM> this latest TSA hassle is a major factor in the decision by Continental to drop its Saipan-Hongkong flights. Sounds to me like the CNMI needs to ask its Washington Rep to intervene - to try persuade TSA to be a bit more accommodating in its security requirements on Saipan. And, actually, for the Guam delegate to Washington to do the same for Guam.</P>

Just as monies for security programs should have been prioritized, from the very beginning, according to where the biggest vulnerabilities and threats were - but which were not - so should the stringency of TSA requirements be prioritized according to where the biggest vulnerabilities and threats are. It is irrational - both wasteful and harmful - to apply to Guam and the CNMI the same degree of security as is applied in LA, NYC, Houston or Detroit, which are major U.S. entry points.</P>

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While not quite at the same level, the provision in recently passed P.L.14-88 that calls for listing candidates by party rather than by position is, in my opinion, also irrational - both wasteful and harmful. For the first time this year, candidates on the ballot will be listed according to the office for which they are running. It is blessedly clear and concise - this form of listing makes it very easy to sort out the names, who is running for what, and what the choices are for each office.</P>

Before this new approach has even been put into practice - before voters have even been given a chance to see how helpful and how much simpler this arrangement is - the legislature, in its paranoia, apparently, has already passed into law a return to the old system where candidates were listed by party. The provision to do so was added by House members to the so-called Ada-Hocog bill generated by the Senate, and the Senate accepted the amendment, so both houses are to blame.</P>

It is wasteful in that the ballot will now be a much bigger document. This in turn, is harmful, since in order to save the cost of additional paper, the ballot will once again be printed on both

sides - something which has confused voters from the very beginning. It is also harmful in that voters will no longer have a clear picture of how many candidates there are for each position, and may cast ballots that will turn out to be flawed and uncountable as a result.</P>

The amendment should never have been proposed, or accepted. Let us hope the 15<sup>th</sup> Legislature is less self-serving, and restores the ballot form to what it should be - a listing by position.</P>

The Election Commission itself, on the other hand, is to be lauded for the great job it has done with voter registration and the great job it is doing in voter education and election procedures in general.</P>

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If one carps enough, sometimes one gets answers. As happened in my case where - as readers know - I have remarked two weeks in a row about the lack of effort by our Red Cross to raise funds for Katrina victims. John Hirsh, executive director of the NMI Red Cross chapter, decided I didn't know enough about how the Red Cross operated, and that it was about time I found out, so he asked that we meet.</P>

He was right. I didn't. Local fund raising for non-local events, for example, is usually prompted by requests from higher up the chain of command. In the case of Katrina, initially no such requests were made - because such generous donations were already coming in from here and other places. In fact, in the first nine days after Katrina hit, the amount of the donations for Katrina victims (in hundreds of millions of dollars) was nearly triple what it had been in the first nine days after 9/11, and more than triple what it had been for victims of the tsunami in Indonesia.</P>

Moreover, the Red Cross is concerned that - believe it or not - more money may be donated, specifically designated for Katrina, than can be spent within the parameters of Red Cross programs - as happened after 9/11. The Red Cross focuses on responding to <EM>immediate</EM> needs for food, shelter, clothing and health care until other agencies can take over.</P>

In the case of Katrina, however, the enormity of the needs over a longer period of time is leading the Red Cross to consider providing longer-term assistance as well. Consequently, an appeal to all chapters, including the one here in the NMI, has now been issued by the National Red Cross office in Washington DC, to actively raise funds for Katrina victims. Appeals are also being made to international Red Cross societies.</P>

Though not highly publicized, the Red Cross has already established 902 shelters across 26 states and the District of Columbia and a "Family Links Registry" to help family members locate each other, and is serving 500-600,000 hot meals a day.</P>

Hirsh noted that in addition to several large donations - as well as smaller ones - that have already been received from CNMI residents, there will be several people from the CNMI sent to mainland sites, primarily to assist with client case work, logistics and providing mental health support services. In addition, receipts from collection boxes in the stores have been earmarked

for Katrina relief efforts. Donations may also be made to the local chapter, or donors can call 1-800-Help Now or log on to <http://www.redcross.org>.

The Red Cross, according to literature Hirsh gave me, keeps only \$.09 of every dollar for administrative costs, so whether you donate to the Red Cross, per se, or whether you donate to the Red Cross Katrina effort, it will be well-spent. As the literature says, "We are committed to using donations efficiently and effectively to fulfill our humanitarian mission."

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I've also received feed-back from the Emergency Management Office - I had asked, in my last column, whether the lessons from Katrina were being applied here. EMO Deputy Director Mark S. Pangelinan hastened to assure me that, among other things, plans are in place for natural and man-made disasters, that "first responder equipment" is in place here and has been sent to Rota and Tinian; that the lines of responsibility between EMO and the Office of Homeland Security are clear; and that the two offices are working harmoniously in refining and up-grading the plans for their respective responsibilities.

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The latest move in the Covenant party's on-going campaign for votes is the issuance of a "Road Map for Better Times," which I found tucked under my windshield wiper the other day. Under ten headings (from Better Economy, Better Environment and Better Essentials to Federal Relations, Public Safety and Social Programs) and five objectives, the newspaper-sized flyer lists 95 steps the party intends to take towards accomplishing "better times."

The steps all make sense. They are all praise-worthy. In fact, they form an inventory of sorts of what is needed to achieve responsive and responsible accountable government. Some examples: "Practice fiscal accountability and end fiscal irresponsibility." "Discontinue practice of creating projects without proper planning." "Improve recruitment and retention of qualified medical care providers on all three islands...." "Enforce all local environmental laws and adopt U.S. environmental standards." "Implement Village Policing programs to restore citizen participation in the delivery of government services." "Perform government operations and functions with transparency and accountability." "Create a task force to assess possible solutions for homestead issues." "Ensure the government's timely payments to CUC for services rendered, so that residential and commercial consumers are not penalized...."

Neither of the other parties has provided so extensive a list. But there is almost more here than anyone could expect to accomplish even over a four-year period. Nor is it at all clear that the few proposals that could generate income would cover the cost of the rest of the promises. But it sure makes a good platform. There's something there for everyone!

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An environmentalist's alert: The U.S. House Resources Committee is planning a re-write of the Endangered Species Act. A brief note in the 9/23 issue of the [Pacific Daily News](#) reports that critical habitat provisions could be deleted in the "top-to-bottom" overhaul of the Act. The bill was set for a vote in Chairman Richard Combo's committee this week.

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Last but not least: the CNMI Judiciary deserves great praise for the two-day "Judges/Journalists Workshop" it held this past week. Funded by a grant from the Donald W. Reynolds National

Center for Courts and Media, in conjunction with the NMI Council for the Humanities, the program was put together by an organizing committee headed by Associate Judge John A. Manglona, and featured journalist/attorney Gary Hengstler, former editor of the <EM>ABA Journal</EM> and currently director of the NCCM.</P>

Hengstler was impressed by the good relationship that he sensed exists between the media and the judiciary here in the CNMI. Nevertheless, the meeting generated much useful dialogue between the two symbiotic sectors as to how the relationship could be improved.</P>