

On My Mind

11/4/05

This week's column poses quite a dilemma. The column goes up on the web on Friday, the 4th - the day before the election. It doesn't appear in the newspaper until Sunday, the 6th, the day after the election, by which time election results should be known. How do I write a column that fits both circumstances? Of course, I could ignore the election altogether, but that wouldn't be any fun - and might even turn off some readers.</P>

Yet it does seem like any number of people feel that election season is too long - or that's what last week's Tribune poll showed: 104 people said it went on too long; only 58 people said it didn't. There's no doubt it will be a big relief to see all those posters come down and once again get clear views around corners and out of entry and exit ways, to not have to worry about traffic jams due to motorcades and "waves," to have week-ends silent once more, with no tinny sound trucks going by.</P>

There's also the concern that much in government slows to a crawl during election season. Bills don't get acted on, investigations are postponed, paperwork isn't processed, decisions aren't made - both because those responsible are too busy campaigning and because they want to wait for the outcome of the elections. It's almost one-third of a year, if one counts the lull between election and inauguration.</P>

Wonder if those who said the election season was not too long were private sector vendors - who must profit enormously from election goings-on. All those cases of ribs and chicken and beer and soda and bags of rice and ice purchased, all those posters printed and plywood sold, all the ads placed in the media, obviously contribute substantially to vendor sales during election season. Would it be going too far to say that politics is perhaps the third largest contributor to the economy? Just think, moreover, about all the BGR taxes that should eventually make their way into government coffers.....</P>

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

Friday the 4th is also Citizenship Day - commemorating the day that then-President Ronald Reagan - prodded by the United Nations - proclaimed the U.N. Trusteeship no longer applicable to the CNMI, and that qualified residents of the CNMI were now U.S. citizens. His declaration also brought into effect all remaining sections of the Covenant.</P>

It's worthy of note that of all the political ads that appeared in both local papers today, only one made any reference to Citizenship Day. No one but gubernatorial candidates Heinz Hofschneider and David Apatang had the presence of mind to make the very obvious connection between the election and Citizenship Day.</P>

Nor was Citizenship Day honored, mentioned, in any non-political ads, or anywhere else. I find it most ironic that the government has apparently been so distracted by election campaigning that it couldn't be bothered doing anything about commemorating the event that has guaranteed us the right to vote, among other things.</P>

Nonetheless, may all citizens exercise their privilege of voting this weekend, and, moreover, do so responsibly!</P>

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

On the other hand, I admit to being a little irresponsible myself, in that I did not remember to pick up the promised copy of the BB team's campaign platform until after I'd finished last week's column. I had said that I had not seen it, and was subsequently offered a copy.</P>

No wonder copies were few and far between! The platform is not just a four-sided news sheet, as were the ones I saw for the Hofschneider-Apatang or the Fitial-Villagomez team, but a substantive, bound, 68-page booklet, full of multiple pictures on almost every page, and all in color!!!! According to the small print on the inside front cover, it was "Not printed at taxpayer expense," but was "Paid for by the Republican National Committee." It may not have been at the CNMI tax payer's expense, but some tax payers somewhere paid for it.....</P>

Most interesting to me was the fact that the description of the actual platform - preceded by 8 pages of "our vision," 7 pages of "what we promised," and 21 pages of "what we've accomplished" - was limited to 11 pages, under the heading: "Here's our work ahead." It may also be worth noting that the BB team seems able to afford such things because it also receives support from the national party.....</P>

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

On the subject of printing costs and related matters: a belated note to Sedy Demesa - though that controversy seems to have died down somewhat - When an "outsider" comes to the CNMI, establishes not only a newspaper, but also a magazine and a television show, all of which make extensive positive comments about one of the candidates for governor - as well as nasty comments about other candidates - that outsider must be naive indeed to think that such actions would not become the center of much attention and discussion. Maybe in urbanized California, no one would notice. But this community is far smaller.... Will be interesting to watch what happens to those endeavors after the election.</P>

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

An article in Tuesday's Pacific Daily News noted that 80% of Guam's line agencies had met - at least in part - the requirements of a Guam law that every government agency have a web site by October 28, 2005, containing all its forms, notices of public meetings, lists of fees and charges, and extensive information about its organization and budget. According to the article, along with contact information including e-mail addresses and physical location, name and title of all administrative staff and board or commission members, and both present and proposed budgets, the agencies were also supposed to post awardee, amount, duration and general description of all contracts, and the amount and general description of all grants received by the agency.</P>

Sounds like a pretty rigorous requirement! A number of CNMI agencies also provide information on the web, and some may come close to living up to the requirements of the Guam law - I have not checked each of the sites now on the web.</P>

But already there are problems. The site for the CNMI Attorney General's office, which recently started posting the Commonwealth Register on-line, is now at least a week behind

in putting up the October issue of the Register. Which means that those who rely on the web for their information have now been deprived, by at least seven to ten days if not more, of their full 30 days to respond to notices of proposed regulations.</P>

Given that the AGO has stopped distributing copies of the Register to various offices and otherwise curtailed public access to paper copies, the AGO should extend the comment period to 30 days after on-line publication, or at the very least, publicly announce that the Register has been published.....</P>

The problem would appear to be broader than that, though - it seems the AG's e-mail isn't working either due to an internal problem with upkeep of the site. Which illustrates one of the flaws of reliance on on-line publication - it's only as good as its state of up-to-date-ness, its maintenance and currency. Shouldn't the AGO be giving this information to the public as well?</P>

A more basic flaw to the contention that it is enough to put information on-line - as both the Guam law and the AGO's efforts seem to believe - is that not everyone who has a need to know has access to a computer, or even the skills to use one even if they did have access.</P>

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

Is it fair to assume that the timing of the decision to turn the large lot of land near the Tanapag cemetery into an extension of the public cemetery in Chalan Kanoa was also prompted by politics? I'm not sure, but it sure brings up a lot of questions: First of all, whose decision was it?

Has anyone done an environmental impact statement? Have residents in the area been consulted? Has anyone looked at the costs involved? Or the suitability of the cemetery given the surroundings? What about the junkyard that just opened across the street? Who will see to it that on one side of the road or another, adequate landscaping will hide the junkyard from view?

What about the seemingly deserted buildings on both sides of the road from the main road to that lot? Great vistas for grieving families! Won't the road need to be repaired and widened to accommodate funerals? Where will cars of mourners be parked?</P>

What about the egrets that have been seen at the wetland depression in the southeastern corner of the lot? What about the depression itself? According to Wednesday's Tribune, the Marianas Public Land Authority has turned the lot over to the Department of Lands and Natural Resources. In fact, a sign has already been posted announcing "Tanapag Public Cemetery." There's no reference to the need for a permit from the Coastal Resource Management Office, yet there's a dire need to stop and ask some serious questions before further action is taken. One surely is: What happened to the original suggestions that the lot be turned into an athletic field for use by students from the northern part of the island?</P>

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

Short Takes:

- While it's not yet up for a vote in the CNMI, there's been a lot of discussion on the pros and cons of an elected attorney general. The example of an elected attorney general on Guam, where it has caused all kinds of friction, delays and other upsets, is not re-assuring. The question has no doubt caught the attention of people here in the CNMI because of the noticeable politicization of the office under the present administration.</P>

- Is the harassment of those on Tinian who put together its 60th anniversary ceremonies also due to politics? I know little of the details, but the occasion has received nothing but praise from all who attended. Yet it received no support from the central government. No wonder corners were cut in funding the event. It would seem incumbent on those invoking judgment to recognize the extenuating circumstances in settling the issues.....</P>

- Whoever does win the election faces some really tough problems. The CNMI's finances are in complete disarray, thanks to the juggling of funds that has been done, particularly under the Governor's emergency declaration in regard to CUC. I don't envy them - regardless of which pair happens to win.</P>