

On My Mind
2/17/06

This column has not appeared for the past four weeks because I have been off-island (that is, on the U.S. mainland) due to the terminal illness and death of one of my children. But more on that later.

For the moment, let's look at more contemporary topics. I find it interesting, for example, that in all the controversy about the Marianas Public Land Authority, the focus has been on its seemingly wasteful and extravagant life style. Granted, when money is in such short supply as it is in the CNMI at the moment, such reckless behavior is scandalous, and deserving not only of criticism but also of immediate curtailment - which, oddly enough, does not seem to be forthcoming.

But there's been little mention of how well MPLA officials have carried out their function, have met their responsibilities to be guardians, if you will, of the CNMI's rapidly dwindling public lands. Have they done all they could to protect and preserve those lands? Have they driven hard bargains in leasing out public lands? Have they been diligent in collecting payments for those leases? Have they made the right decisions regarding use of public lands? Have they made sure that public lands are being used in the most appropriate manner, to best advantage to the people of the CNMI?

A critical issue confronting MPLA is what to do about the homestead program. It simply cannot continue as it is - there are too many people in line for homesteads, and too little land left to give them. MPLA should have long since come up with a solution - be it a gradual phasing out of the homestead program, the promotion of a multi-residential approach, or the redefinition of the program as inter-island, rather than island-specific. It should also, long since, have exercised far tighter control as to who was eligible for a homestead to begin with. If it had done so, there'd be far more homesteads now available - and far fewer people claiming eligibility for them.

In short, the question that has not been asked in the controversy over MPLA's fate is: can, or will, MPLA do a better job if left in place with a new board, or if brought under the governor's control?

However valid the reasoning for not immediately cutting off MPLA's access to further funding, one thing seems clear. In addition to imposing controls on how MPLA spends its money in the future, whatever action is taken to cure it of its wastefulness should also make sure that MPLA does a better job of doing what it is supposed to do than it does now.

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I found it shocking that the administration would make a unilateral decision to drop the Micronesian games without consulting with the local games committee, without first issuing a general appeal to the public for help and support. It just seemed as though no one was given a chance to try make a go of it. I know I would have gladly given at least \$50.00 towards keeping them here, and I imagine many others would also have offered to contribute time, money, effort, materials. It is, after all, a matter of pride in one's community, islands, athletes. And as has been said, not all of the items included in the original budget were absolutely necessary.

Will the government also decide to withhold any support to the teams that will now have to raise funds to go elsewhere - provided the games are held at all? I would hope that the governor would be willing to reconsider - to give at least a week's grace to allow a full-scale funding effort to get underway.

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Short takes:

With all the emphasis, in the executive branch, on cutting costs, has anyone done a cost-benefit analysis as to what impact cancelling cell phones, cutting the number of phone lines, prohibiting answering services, and all of that, has on the government revenues generated from phone company services? Surely the withdrawal/cancellation of all those services reduces the income to the phone companies. How much will that reduction affect government revenue? Is the amount small enough to offset the inconvenience to government officials and the public they serve? Was there any consultation with the phone companies for, perhaps, an adjustment in rates? Or was the decision made unilaterally - not even taking into account its impact on the private sector?

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On the subject of inconvenience to the public: the Bureau of Motor Vehicles has begun closing its payment window during lunch hour (not the normal lunch hour, but from noon to 1:00 p.m.), so those who try to do business at the BMV during that time cannot complete their transactions, because they cannot make the required fee payments. I thought it was government policy to keep its offices open over lunch in order to better serve the public?

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Not only that, but this week, the BMV's computer was down for three days, with nary a word to the public that it could not, therefore, process any paperwork.

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Still on the subject of economics and cutting costs: where are the efforts by the legislature to cut their costs? There's not been a whisper, even, that members might consider cutting some of their extravagances - starting with the super-cold climate in their offices. Shouldn't **all** government agencies, offices, employees be expected to do their part in cutting costs, pinching pennies?

It may be a lack of knowledge, but so far as I can see, the Judicial branch, on the other hand, is perennially short of funds, and should not be required to cut more. The most obvious proof is in the total lack of support for operation of the Guma Justicia's law library, where no one makes sure the volumes are kept up to date, and it's only open during normal working hours - just when most attorneys are unable to make use of its collection.

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Yet despite a shortage of funds, seemingly pointless minor changes are being made to road markers along Beach Road - involving the use of work crews and heavy equipment, and snarling traffic - allegedly to widen the road, no doubt because Federal funds are available for the project. Federal relations may have been "very good" during the previous administration, but when they result in work being done that isn't

really necessary or appropriate to the CNMI, merely because funds are available and the CNMI "ought" to use them, use of those funds seems almost counter-productive.

Wasn't there some way those funds could have been used to build sidewalks? Or even better, to re-mark pedestrian crossings - especially on Middle Road - so the slaughter of pedestrians doesn't continue? The finding that the pedestrian was at fault for her death in the accident near Navy Hill last month was a disgrace. In the first place, the cross-walk markings are barely visible, and the "poor lighting" that the policed report indicated - and most likely would have prevented the motorist from seeing the cross-walk to begin with - certainly was not her fault.

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One could also mention the over-sized, over-designed, over-cost, not-yet-occupied new prison as another example of inappropriate application of federal monies to the CNMI. Yes, the new prison was built in response to a federal finding that the existing prison was inadequate, but was it really necessary to build such a huge, windowless monstrosity that the CNMI now cannot afford to operate and maintain? Those within the CNMI responsible for federal relations - and federal grants - should, it seems to me, exercise a little more muscle in making sure the federal requirements take into consideration the CNMI's particular circumstances. The CNMI is, after all, not California, or New York, or even Hawaii or Guam.

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My son's death, at age 52, offers several homilies, if you will. He was a diabetic, but did not watch his diet. And he was a heavy consumer of alcohol, though thankfully neither abusive nor violent. He refused to understand that his body was not indestructible, that it was affected by what and when he ate and drank. Which is not to say that I did not love him and do not miss him. I do. Sorely. But I was not able to convince him, nor were either his wife or his siblings, to take our concerns seriously enough to significantly change his attitude or his habits.

He nevertheless had an exemplary death. He was determined not to die in a hospital. He wanted to die in his own bed. And he wanted a "farewell" party of family and friends - which would not, of course, have been possible in the hospital. Everyone felt that the party - a living wake - was a great success. He also wanted to say good-bye to a group of pick-up beach volleyball players he'd regularly played with some 30 miles away - and was able to do that too, with the help of a motorized wheel chair we'd rented for him. He managed to put some business affairs in order. And then he died. An architect who specialized in corporate facilities relocation, he defiantly - and successfully - planned his own "relocation" as well.

His dying introduced us to the hospice program. Hospice programs offer terminally ill patients what is called "palliative" care - care that tries to eliminate pain, make patients comfortable, meet their needs and those of their families. The hospice program that served my son provided a wheel chair, a walker, a potty chair, a chair for the shower, medications, an oxygen concentrator, regular nurse visits, visits from a "bath lady" who gave him bath and a shampoo in bed, incontinence supplies, access to a chaplain, helpful booklets on caring, death and dying, a vetted list of mortuaries, a visit from a doctor who removed the dialysis shunts he still had, visits from a social

worker who helped both my son and the family.....all at no cost to the family.

I was deeply impressed. The people we dealt with were patient, understanding, helpful, comforting, reassuring - and available 24 hours a day. There were a few small glitches - because he left the hospital over a week-end, because the hospice crew at one time was dealing with five distraught family members all demanding answers at the same time - but I have no complaints.

In fact, I'd like to see a hospice program established here. Readers' thoughts on the matter would be welcome.....

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Movie ratings this week: 2 R's, 4 PG-13's, and 2 PG's - probably a fair enough ratio, if only the films themselves were better.