

On My Mind

3/10/06

OK, so the administration - Governor Fitial et al - has bit the bullet, as they say, and is making some difficult and unpopular decisions. But does it have to follow the pattern of a bull-dozer, and, willy-nilly, take down everything in its path with no thought to what is being destroyed? However the decisions are being reached, leading to the actions the administration has taken or is proposing, it would appear that any number of significant and substantial features are being totally ignored in the process.</P>

The governor cancelled the Micronesian Games, without, apparently, consulting either the athletes or the general community. That decision had to be withdrawn. Now he has cancelled the contract for the Marpi landfill - ignoring not only the widespread praise the landfill and its contractors have received for its design, construction and operation, but also the stance of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which saw to its establishment, and which will - without a doubt - follow very closely what happens there as a consequence of the contract cancellation.</P>

He is threatening to ignore plans for the Garapan public market - already developed and for which land has already been acquired as well as a contract bid out, a winner chosen, and for which money has already been identified - in favor of a yet-to-be-identified foreign investor, and a yet-to-be-identified project.</P>

He ignores advice on how to promote tourism with the Japanese freely offered to him by a major player in the tourist market, which said, in part, that "Administration should initiate the farmers' and fishermen's market...which will be a place of interest for tourists" (reported in today's Tribune).</P>

The governor appears to be ignoring anyone who has knowledge and experience in the operations over which he has declared he wants control. If the Commonwealth Development Authority is not fulfilling its purpose, if the Commonwealth Ports Authority is not performing to the governor's liking, wouldn't it make more sense to retain the framework, and make the changes with input from those within, rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water?</P>

And what about the decision to cut some government employees' work hours? No rationale, no justification, no data has been provided as to why that route was taken - excluding some agencies altogether as well as low-paid positions - rather than a cut across the board, or including all agencies, or reducing positions rather than salary, or even imposing a sales tax. Instead, a bull-dozer approach is being used, mowing down anything in the way.</P>

The economic situation, the cash-flow problems are dire. But that doesn't justify taking blunt, peremptory, mindless, hurtful actions. The governor might want to consider consulting with those affected, accepting expert advice, taking the needs and concerns of the community into consideration, and mapping his route a little more carefully, before he loses his bull-dozer.</P>
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The Pacific Daily News ran a story this past week about the number of snakes that have been captured on Guam over the past eight years. There have been 5,223. The article did not say what happens to them all. Presumably, they were killed, but then what? Isn't snake considered a delicacy in some cultures? Couldn't snake kelaguan, or snake sushi, or snake soup be introduced as a food unique to Guam, and offered to tourists as a rare and expensive menu option?</P>

What about the skins? Aren't belts and wallets and shoes made from snake skin? Does Guam's brown tree snake not lend itself to such application? Just think of it, whole new industries, providing employment, revenue, and new tourism enticements - based on a pest everyone is trying to get rid of in the first place!</P>

It could even generate a snake-hunting industry, as people realize the value of what has until now been considered not only a nuisance but also an environmental disaster. And with more people more zealously hunting the snakes Guam might even be able to rid itself of the critters altogether.</P>

If that actually happened, that would, of course, kill the snake-food and snake-leather industry, but it would have eradicated the snakes. Besides, by the time that happened, those 8,000 Marines would probably have arrived on Guam, and there'd be jobs aplenty.</P>

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The point is not that the CNMI should try and do the same thing. So far as I'm aware, not enough snakes get caught in the CNMI to make it even worth thinking about (though people here who did catch them could, perhaps, sell them to the snake industry on Guam). The point is that there are ways to generate value - jobs and income - and to be environmentally conscious, aware, responsible without necessarily having to go out and bring in foreign investors.</P>

Foreign investors are big, glamorous, and, supposedly, rich. But how many of them can be said to have the CNMI's best interests at heart? Generally speaking, off-island investors are out to make money for themselves, not for the CNMI. Since the CNMI is a small-scale economy, wouldn't it be more suitable to look for, solicit, bring in, small-scale investors?</P>

Any number of possibilities spring to mind. There are already efforts underway to farm shrimp locally, and to raise tilapia. But so far not enough of either have reached production levels to provide a reliable source to local markets. Would small off-island investments help here? What about Tinian's red peppers? That too has a much larger potential market. What would it take to get there? Could the CNMI produce black pepper on a par with what Ponape produced for a while?</P>

Handicrafts are another area where support seems to be needed to sustain a viable market. In one part of Indonesia, villagers are making unique ornaments and jewelry for the tourist market from fish scales. What's to stop people here from doing the same thing - developing a truly unusual item from what is locally plentiful? What if the CNMI finally enacted and enforced a meaningful "made in the CNMI" label requirement for handicrafts sold to tourists? Could the CNMI sustain a women's craft-making cooperative?</P>

Rather than taking money away from people who are fortunate enough to have jobs - which is what the current administration seems intent on doing to meet government revenue needs - what about helping those who don't have jobs develop their own income sources? Encouraging small scale ventures might take a bit more imagination, creativity and time, but it could easily lead to a much more productive economy. In addition, with small-scale investments, maintaining local control should be far easier than in multi-dollar projects.</P>

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The CNMI could also attract more tourists if it were willing to offer to share costs with Guam agencies for bringing over mainland, or Hawaii-based attractions - speakers, bands, shows, and the like. CNMI tourists don't have a lot to do in the evening, except to subject themselves to the "ladies of the night" parading around Garapan. Bringing performers into the CNMI is an expensive undertaking. But if Guam and the CNMI were to work together to bring in shows, with each notifying the other of the intent to do so, and offering the other access to the shows in exchange for some support, tourist evening entertainment could improve substantially.</P>

That idea - of sharing information on notables brought to the islands - applies to the Humanities Council and Public School System and Northern Marianas College as well. How often there are accounts of this or that performer or show or author or other notable speaker appearing on Guam. It seems so wasteful not to spend the few hundred dollars it would take to bring them to the CNMI so students, or the community or tourists could also enjoy and benefit from their presence here.</P>

Maybe this is an added responsibility that could be assigned to the Guam liaison office? To look out for performers, shows, other notable speakers coming to Guam and try to arrange to bring them to the CNMI?</P>

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Short takes:

- Guam's legislature is about to consider a bill that would set caps on physician liability, in an effort to tempt more doctors to come to Guam. Shouldn't our legislature be doing something similar?</P>

- A little late, but does anyone else have problems with the over-sized 2006 phone books, that no longer fit in the same space as previous ones did, and are so bulky they're hard to handle at all? Do we really need a calendar? Such large print? (and then the tide charts are miniaturized!) Though I've yet had call to use them, I suppose the road maps are a good idea, and I do use the tide charts, but I'd rather have two smaller publications - one with the phone numbers, and the other with all the reference information.</P>

- As I know from experience, Mr. Blalock doesn't take criticism very well, but I do think he's stepped over the line in his 3/03 "Food for Thought" comments. It's bad enough that he droned on and on about particular political figures and their shortcomings, as he did about the former governor, but to personally attack a colleague, as he did last week shows both poor taste and poor judgment.</P>

Blalock was not satisfied in raking a colleague over the coals. In the same column, he took a student to task as well. Neither would have been as objectionable if he could have maintained some objectivity in his remarks. But he did not. They were personal, under-handed, and as disrespectful as he accused his targets of being.</P>

Movies of the week: 4 PG's (of which all but one ("Eight Below") are incredibly silly; 3 PG 13's (of which only one ("Ultraviolet") is silly, and 1 R.</P>