

On My Mind

4/7/06

Whew! It's gone! That smoky, smelly, dirty, pall that has covered the island for the last several days is finally gone. How nice to see a bright sun, and clear blue sky, and green hills again! But I'd still like to know what really happened, what we were experiencing. I have to confess I have a hard time accepting that it was "Asian smog," as at least one of the advisories from the Emergency Management Office called it. In the 25 years I have lived on Saipan, never before do I remember hearing that an Asian smog had reached us.

If it was Asian smog, where did it come from? Except for a relatively small channel between Japan to the north and the Philippines further south, there is no opening through which smog from Asia could reach the CNMI without first landing somewhere else, and even there the Ryuku Islands and Taiwan lie between Asia proper and the CNMI. Did it come only to Saipan? Not to Japan, or the Philippines or the Ryukus or Taiwan? Why would it not also have affected Guam? It's all very strange. And not very reassuring, particularly when the two local papers carry conflicting stories - today's *Variety* quoting the Department of Public Health's Dr. Bostrom as saying the pollution is coming from Anatahan, and today's *Tribune* quoting the EMO as saying the source is not Anatahan but Asia.

Or was this a symptom, somehow, of the changes that global warming brings?

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Finally, a public hearing on the issue of cutting government salaries! Actually, the hearing will be on three bills proposing different approaches to the salary cuts, one from the House, one from the Senate, and another that amends the Senate bill. The Saipan hearing is set for 6:30 p.m., Wednesday, April 12, at the multi-purpose center in Susupe; hearings are also scheduled for Tinian and Rota.

I hope the members of the two legislative committees holding the public hearing get themselves well-organized, and are well-prepared - with brief but clear presentations of the options being considered, with copies of the bills (or summaries, if full texts are too long) available for the public, and with rules for discussion (like time limits for speakers, and a stop watch and time-keepers to enforce them) while retaining the ability to be flexible. It is, after all, apt to be a rather tumultuous session.

It would be nice if the members of the committees - or maybe a spokesman from the administration? - would also provide some information about whether the proposed cuts would stay in place only until the present crisis ends, and what that indicator would be, or whether they are envisaged as being permanent - as an adjustment, of sorts, to the discrepancy between government and private sector pay scales. Provide information about how much money the cuts would make available to the government and whether it really would all go to fuel costs, as some have said. Provide information on how the impact on the Retirement Fund would be dealt with.

It also would be helpful to know whether reducing the rebate, as has also been proposed, is seen as being a substitute for cutting salaries, or as an addition to doing so. And if a substitute, how much of a rebate reduction would be needed if salaries were not cut. Or whether another approach - simply cutting the size of government operations by attrition - assuming the attrition were allowed to take place - would make cutting salaries unnecessary. Has anyone

done the math? Does anyone know which is most effective?

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Congressman Absalon V. Waki, Jr., who introduced the bill proposing a 10% cut in salaries, was asked to talk about his bill at this past week's Saipan Chamber of Commerce meeting. His presentation quickly morphed into an appeal for Chamber members - as well as the general public - to provide input to legislators on this and other bills. He said that the government lacks the ability to educate people as to what it is doing, but noted that since the legislators represent the community, it should be up to the legislators to provide such information, to educate the community. In a refreshing role turnabout, he told meeting attendees, "We work for you, so call us, come and see us, let us know your concerns."

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On the subject of the availability of information, I was shocked to discover that the Retirement Fund's third-party administrator was getting paid more for the off-island referrals it arranged than for treatments it approved by on-island doctors, and, moreover, that the administrator - Hawaii Pacific Medical Referrals - was giving a higher priority to paying those off-island bills than paying bills for on-island medical care. The information comes in an article by Dr. David Khorram in today's *Tribune*.

Why is it that such critical information is not more readily available? Why was such a practice allowed in the first place? If, as I've always understood the case to be, the CNMI believes more health care should be privatized, so as to take the burden off the government, how could a practice so discriminatory against private-care physicians be approved, let stand so long?

It seems a strangely self-defeating practice. If conditions for private physicians were more supportive, it is very likely that fewer off-island referrals would have to be made to begin with.

One can only hope that the agreement with the new third-party administrator does not perpetrate this short-sighted, biased and counter-productive policy!

It is already disconcerting that contracts with a new third-party administrator and a new prescription drug benefit management service were signed without, apparently, any knowledge of what rates the two companies would charge members.

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Also disconcerting was the statement by newly-elected Marianas Visitors Authority Board Chairman Jerry Tan in the *Tribune's* Thursday issue. According to the paper, Tan said that in order to attract more tourists, the CNMI should provide more shopping centers. I would beg to differ. More stores, more concretized malls, we do not need. There are already a number of them - stores and malls - sitting empty.

The CNMI might need an improvement, an upgrade, in the quality of what is available in its stores and malls, but Saipan, at least, certainly doesn't need more of them. Let Guam be the shopping mecca. The CNMI's strength is in its beauty, its serenity, its beaches, and shoreline and lagoon waters. It should protect and foster that unique characterization, rather than trying to become merely a smaller version of some commercial, urbanized, over-developed, destination.

There's enough of a challenge just in making the CNMI attractive to tourists - as was discussed at some length at the Zoning Board's most recent meeting, held last night. Problems identified ranged from abandoned cars, broken picnic tables and benches and dead dogs to piles of trash, mildewed building walls and unsightly construction - not to mention the ubiquity of plastic bags on shore and in the water. Though many of the problems fall outside the Zoning Board's responsibility, board members concluded that the more basic issue is two-fold: either no one else has been assigned the responsibility for cleaning up such eyesores, or enforcement of the assigned responsibility has been lacking.

Bringing in higher levels of merchandise - to be sold in existing venues - is a very good idea. It would no doubt lead to a cleaning up of the many sloppy store fronts now in place all over the island, which, in turn, would bring a double advantage - more shopping choices for the tourists, as well as a more pleasing environment.

But please! Not more malls!

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One "mall" - the Paseo - what this column in the past has labelled "Jordan's Folly" - briefly sprang to life last Saturday night, when a group of Japanese drummers - and one flutist - drew tourist and resident alike to a compelling, vibrant, and lively performance of traditional Japanese wadaiko music. People of all ages from infants in strollers to senior citizens flocked to the stage area, to sit and watch 13 professionals, who were clearly enjoying themselves, display their skills, dance in rhythmic accompaniment and offer humorous interludes.

Along the edges, several of the restaurants set up impromptu stands, offering one or more of their specialties to the audience before, during and after the performance, among them the Taste of India's famous tandoori chicken.

For once, there were no hookers blatantly in evidence, and the Paseo seemed equally vibrant with the many attendees chatting among themselves, cheering the performers, and afterwards, staying to visit further, to compare notes, to go off to Paseo restaurants for dinner after the show.

Last Saturday night was Paseo life as it should be, and it was a real pleasure to see it materialize, however briefly. I also liked the multi-generational appeal of the music. The group had also performed at the Thursday night street market, but I found the Paseo setting more appealing. The show has since been described as the end point of a three-month drive to promote traffic on the Paseo. What a pity! A continuing, on-going, schedule of such performances is the best way I can think of to promote an increase in desirable traffic there.

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Movies this week: 2 R's, 4 PG-13's, and one PG.