

On My Mind  
5/05/06

Well, the Flame Tree Festival is over for another year. It was, I thought, better attended than most. But it also had, judging from the three times I went, fewer tourists than most. In fact, I did not see any, though I've been told there were some. It's just incomprehensible to me that the CNMI's major showcase of art and culture isn't being more effectively marketed to tourists - especially given that tourism is supposedly such a major component of the CNMI's economy.

Former Arts Council Director Rob Hunter made an eloquent statement about the Flame Tree Festival's potential as a tourist attraction in this past week's papers. He also drew a rather sharp contrast between what Hawaii offers and what the CNMI offers to tourists in the area of arts and culture. Of course, Hawaii is larger, and has more resources. But the CNMI could do far more to attract tourists in this regard than it is doing.

The idea is not original with me, but the best suggestion for how to do so that I've come across is to require tour agents to include at least five cultural attractions in their packages. Tour agents do not bring their clients to the island's cultural attractions because no one pays them a commission for doing so. To get around that, the tour agents should be mandated to do so by law. Candidates include such year-round attractions as the CNMI Museum, the American Memorial Park museum, the Thursday street market, Chamolinian Village, and such seasonal events as the Flame Tree Festival, the Taste of the Marianas, and the Art Council's various art shows.

After all, the Flame Tree Festival has now been in existence for 25 years. As Hunter pointed out, just think of how many tourists the Festival could have drawn for this benchmark anniversary if it had been properly marketed as a tourist attraction all these years! Similar cultural events all over the world draw huge tourist crowds. The CNMI's should too. After all, isn't it in the tourist business???

If law makers want the Festival to flourish, if they want tourist travel to increase, they would do well to legislate the mandate that tour guide include such events in their tours.

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Moreover, if the governor really does spare the Marianas Visitors Authority from budget cuts, as has been reported he intends to do, he should also require that the MVA do more to give the tourists reasons for coming here. MVA spends most of its time, effort and money on promoting the CNMI, - but does very little to enhance, protect, or improve the product it is trying to sell. If the product isn't selling well, throwing more money into selling isn't the solution.

Instead, the MVA should work toward developing, and supporting, the infrastructure that Hunter describes in his letter: "a quality state arts gallery and cultural center, support for the new mariculture center and/or aquarium, public art (sculpture, murals, statuary), NMI museum, Chamolinian Cultural Village, local market, an historic district and quality annual cultural activities like the Flame Tree Arts Festival."

It should also get more involved in support of clean beaches, reef protection, a pollution-free lagoon, safe scuba diving, and the like. It is not enough to advertise these things. MVA must use more of its resources more pro-actively to make sure the product lives up to the expectations MVA is creating. If the product is good, and the tourists are happy, their word-of-mouth advertising will be far more cost-effective than MVA's present road and pony

show for travel agents.

It might require a change in the law to encourage MVA to take action along such lines - since it is now charged only with "promotion" of the CNMI - but that should present no major hurdle.

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It was a brilliant stroke to open the Flame Tree on a Thursday, and not open the street market that night, so the Flame Tree could draw that audience as well. While the hard work of staff and performers contributed, I'm inclined to think the huge crowd on Thursday was largely due to the usurpation of the street market by the arts fair.

It seemed incongruent, however, to see - in what was advertised as an arts and craft show - booths that sold ordinary clothing, that sold junk jewelry and souvenirs, that sold jewelry that was not hand crafted and that was not made in the CNMI. That may be ok for the street market, but it doesn't belong at an arts festival.

It would have been nice to have more seating available in the food court area. It would have been even nicer to see the Palauan and Hawaiian food booths up and operating. What an inexcusable policy failure that was! And while selling programs may be a valid way to defray expenses, it should not have been necessary to pay even \$3.00 to find out whose booth was where. That doesn't help the artists at all, and if artists aren't happy they may not return.... Far better to have charged for the entertainment schedule, adding to its value by providing some details on each of the performing groups - member pictures, origin, etc., etc. Having such information on all the groups that appeared over the four days of the festival could easily be worth \$3.00 - or maybe even \$5.00.

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Another good idea not original with me is to change the nature and scope of the Arts Council so it more closely resembles those of the CNMI Humanities Council. The Humanities Council writes grants for federal funds, and then puts out what are, in effect, requests for projects to the community, using the funds it obtained to support local groups endeavors. It does not itself conduct the activities.

Similarly, the Arts Council could - some say should - use the grant money it obtains from the federal government to issue requests for projects to the artist community, and use its funds to support those activities. Staff would then not be required to actually mount art exhibits, or even the Flame Tree Festival - staff would, instead, assist local groups in applying for funds and in planning the activities. Artists would be challenged to take a more active role in promoting their works to the community and to tourists. They would even, perhaps - in taking things into their own hands - be more creative in doing so.

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The CNMI may be undergoing a fiscal crisis, but according to *Pacific Daily News* stories, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is even worse off. It reported that 45 of nearly 120 government agencies have shut down and their 100,000 public employees not paid, as well as 1600 schools shut down. The island has a \$740 million shortfall, but governor and legislators are feuding as to how to solve the problem, with the governor refusing to support an increase in taxes for large corporations being proposed by the legislature.

Which does not bode well for the CNMI's request for bail-out from the U.S. Congress. If faced with a shortfall in the CNMI versus one in Puerto Rico, chances are Congress would support Puerto Rico, because it is bigger, more populated, and has a non-voting delegate in the

House. On the other hand, it's conceivable that with the CNMI asking for less, Congress might feel it could more easily afford a lesser amount more than a larger one. Time will tell.

And while on the subject of other islands' problems, did anyone note the story in today's *Tribune* that American Samoa's tuna cannery has had to shut down for lack of fish? The story says only, "they're not catching enough fish." Could it be that over-fishing is taking its toll?

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The situation seems to get more confusing with every new headline. First it was work hours that were going to be cut. Then it was announced that pay cuts were imminent. No, said a headline, they're off the table. No, backtracked another headline, they're not dead. And now comes talk of a flat income tax. Where is reality here? What criteria will determine which strategy to implement? Who's drawing up those criteria - if indeed there are any? It almost seems a matter of chance: whatever doesn't get knocked down, whatever floats, whatever can be put into effect one way or another, will win, regardless of relative merits.

The reaction has been virtually unanimous that across the board pay cuts except for high-paying positions - which was originally proposed - were not acceptable. What makes the administration think that a flat tax - across the board - will be any more acceptable? Those with large enough salaries will have discretionary income to absorb the cut, while those with small salaries who barely make ends meet now, won't be able to at all. A flat tax may be simpler to impose than a graduated tax, but it should be obvious that a tiered system would be far more palatable.

Moreover, as Senator Maria T. Pangelinan is reported, in today's *Variety*, as saying, pay cuts are but a band-aid approach, and do not solve the real problem, which is a bloated government. It's a pity that the administration doesn't pay more attention, refusing altogether, apparently, to even consider her position that an increase in wages would be more fruitful. Here, too, a tiered system would seem appropriate. Given that most professional financial experts appear to be in agreement that an increase in wages is not only do-able, but also necessary and prudent - not to mention being a real step towards long-term solution - the governor's insistence that wages not be increased, is short-sighted indeed. Though perhaps this is another pronouncement just being thrown out to see if it will float?

And still there is no talk of doing away with tax rebates. As it is, the CNMI imposes no real estate tax, no school tax, nor any of the myriad other taxes that states employ to generate revenue. On top of that, the CNMI rebates much of those few taxes that are paid. No one else does that, and it makes no sense for the CNMI to do so. If the tax system is to be overhauled, or revised, or whatever, it would seem only logical to expect that tax rebates would be the first item to be deleted.

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There will be no column on May 12 or May 19, as I will be cruising around Indonesia's Flores and Komodo Islands. (Back issues are always available, in the Archives.) The column will resume on May 26. May I thank-you in advance for your kind understanding.

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This week's movies: 1 R, 5 PG-13's, 2 PG's. Maybe kiddies aren't supposed to go to movies?