

On My Mind
8/18/06

Returning to Saipan after a month on the mainland wasn't the shock to my system that that first blast of hot humid air usually brings because, thanks to their recent heat waves, I experienced that same hot humid air in both Boston and LA, where I'd been visiting. (The one saving grace was that while everyone else suffered, I felt right at home.) But it was a shock to discover that rolling power outages were still on-going, and that not much else had changed either. The debate about how to cut government work hours still rages, privatization of CUC has come no closer, no new industries have been established, government offices are still too cold, and assorted legislators are still wasting time, playing games.

Of course, a month is not very long, and as I learned in Hawaii many years ago, Polynesian paralysis - it takes twice as long to accomplish half as much - takes its toll. Admittedly, the "Polynesian" label is unfair. Though "tropical torpidness (torpidity?)" doesn't seem as fitting.

The disheartening thing about it is that there seems to be no rhyme or reason to most of the proposals being put forth on how to cope with the CNMI's present dire circumstances. [Question: how did it get to be so bad in just eight months? JAL had already withdrawn, and garment factories had already begun to close before the end of the last administration. It's hard to believe that the present situation is solely due to fuel cost increases. So what is going on, anyway? The coconut wireless has it that the goal is to make things so miserable everyone will welcome the idea of casinos on Saipan. But I digress.]

For instance, just how much will shutting down government every other Friday generate? And where will that money be put instead? If employees are put on furlough for a month, how much will that generate? More or less than shutting down every other Friday? Has anyone looked at the figures? How does the administration expect people to pay their rent, their utility bill, buy food, meet other expenses, if the furlough is imposed? Will it tell landlords, banks, other rent recipients to also "take a furlough" and not collect rents? Will it forgive the utility payments during that furlough period? Will the employees ever get that money back - and the benefits that were supposed to have accrued? Will extra funding be provided Karidat, will extra food stamps be available? Has anyone really thought it through????

Or did the administration think it unnecessary to do so, because the furlough idea was never intended to be more than a threat, blackmail, so that the legislature would approve the alternate Friday shutdowns instead?

Making permanent the recent astronomical CUC rate increase makes no sense either. If CUC is privatized, shouldn't the new operator/manager have a say in determining the rates? If just one of the offers of help comes through, won't that bring costs down? And wouldn't more efficient management lower the rates in any case?

If government car ownership is reduced, how are employees expected to get to work? Will they be given mileage on their private vehicles? Why not, in the process, do as Guam is proposing, and establish standards for government vehicle purchase - for example, that all cars be four cylinder, that they get at least 29 mpg, that they be sedans and not SUVs?

And then there are the governor's attempts to micromanage not only executive agencies - virtually aborting NMC's nursing program - but the legislature and the so-called independent agencies as well, while ignoring the advice of the attorney general he himself appointed and

hiring dubiously qualified consultants. Does anyone else see the resemblance to what's happening in Washington, D.C., where the president issues letter rulings, taking exceptions to parts of laws he doesn't like, and the members of Congress hand out pork to all their constituents?

Meanwhile legislators are proposing that a commission be established to re-examine the CNMI's status within the United States - as though that were a real issue at the moment; as though there were funds to do so, as though it was fitting that time and energy be devoted to such an undertaking under present circumstances!

Another legislator has withdrawn the long-overdue proposal to suspend tax rebates - oddly enough, supposedly because of pressure from the Chamber, whose advice and suggestions the legislature ordinarily does not heed.... Moreover, if tax rebates are to be suspended - actually they should be abolished! - wouldn't it be better not to do it all at once, but in stages? Reduce them by half the first year, and then eliminate them all together the following year?

Then there's the proposal to purchase a decompression chamber to treat SCUBA divers who've been careless enough to go too deep. Has anyone rationalized how expensive these are versus how rarely there is a demand for one in the CNMI? Aren't there dozens of other health-related needs that are far greater?

Not to mention the grandstanding in the Senate over budget matters. As some sage put it, "It's deja vu all over again." The stories, the promises, keep changing, but nothing happens.....

On a different plane, DoI Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Insular Affairs David Cohen has scheduled another of his "Business Opportunities in the Islands" conferences - to take place in Hawaii in November. "Opportunities" to be offered include tourism, high tech/broadband, infrastructure development and improvement, and contracting opportunities - all requiring big outlays of capital and a level of expertise not readily available in the islands themselves - and therefore offering little of real use to most local residents except in spill-over effects, should there be any.

It might be time for a radical reassessment of what would serve the islands best and still enable them to retain their existing cultures, life-styles, land use patterns, ecological and environmental balance without bankrupting their economy. Not to mention the fact that it's already clear that most entrepreneurs are not willing to invest here given the poor condition of Saipan's infrastructure.

In the first place, people need to ask themselves what the point is of all the money new industries are supposed to generate, why it's needed, where it would go. The obvious answer is that much, if not most, would go to support the personnel-heavy over-sized government now burdening the CNMI. If the CNMI's House of Representatives - to start someplace - were reduced to twelve, instead of the 18 present members, and if the extravagant allowances per member and per committee were reduced to something more reasonable, the result would be an immediate reduction of several million dollars in the budget. If government staffing were cut a modest 5%-10% - weeding out all the extraneous warm bodies most agencies have - the budget needs would be reduced even more.

In fact, people need to ask themselves why the CNMI's present budget isn't enough. And

the answer is pretty much the same. New monies from new investors would not solve any problems, but merely continue supporting something the CNMI doesn't need to begin with - a bloated government. Reduce the size of government, and those extra monies wouldn't even be needed.

So where, how, would people earn income? What about developing niche products aimed not at the world market, but made exclusively for CNMI tourists? What would it take to start up a small coconut soap operation - producing just enough to satisfy CNMI tourists? How about using fish scales, of which there are plenty, to make jewelry - which is already being done in Sulawesi? What about continuing Sebastian Camacho's shell jewelry production - small scale for a local market? What about regular mawr-making - for sale every Thursday at the street market for everyone's Friday "dress island style" attire? Woven pandanus or coconut hats, mats, coasters?

In other words, the DoI might better support and develop cottage-type industries that would provide employment and income, create a unique product for tourists, use natural on-island resources, and would not damage the environment or require huge tracts of land, or increase the burden on the infrastructure. Moreover, in the process, people could acquire useful skills in marketing and accounting, save on gas and child care bills, while providing a highly marketable enhancement to the tourist industry.

What's more - there seems to be ample funding available through Small Business Development Center training programs and micro-loans.

Bottom line? Reduce the size of government, and increase local earning and production capabilities, and Saipan won't need shoe factories, or casinos, or foreign investors, won't be beset by power outages, won't need to sacrifice more land to developers.

Short takes:

Has anyone contacted the Guam Department of Corrections - which just recently said it would need \$90 million to upgrade its facilities for the influx of those 8000 Marines from Okinawa - and offered to negotiate the use of the CNMI's new multi-million dollar but not-yet-open prison facilities?

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Who allowed the contract for providing uniforms for Kagman students and teachers to be awarded to a Guam company? Saipan doesn't have enough seamstresses? Where is the support for local businesses???

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Who can explain the discrepancy between the promised \$1.5 million said to be expected from the sale of government cars and the \$18.8 thousand actually garnered? That's a huge difference...

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Why can't CUC get an answering system for its trouble desk that gives callers a recorded message explaining what the trouble is thought to be and giving an estimate about when power is expected to be restored - instead of frustrating one and all with its continuous busy signal during power outages?

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Last but not least, the Department of Lands and Natural Resources has sure gone out on

a limb - endorsing the Grotto mono-rail project before an environmental impact assessment has even been undertaken!

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