

On My Mind
09/29/06

The audit of private sector jobs that the Office of the Public Auditor has been asked to do certainly evokes a lot of questions, issues, ideas. The OPA is undertaking the audit in an effort to identify private sector jobs presently occupied by foreign workers that could be turned over to local residents. The move was prompted in part by the increase in numbers of unemployed locals in both the public and the private sectors due to the CNMI's declining economy.

A major issue will no doubt be the CNMI's minimum wage. It has long been said that the low minimum wage is the biggest factor in the lack of interest in private sector jobs by local residents. If the goal is to move more islanders into the private sector, it may well become necessary to increase the minimum wage. The need to raise the minimum wage has long been acknowledged. Perhaps the audit will finally tip the scales, and persuade legislators - and private sector employers - that doing so will bring more good than harm.

At present, certain jobs are reserved for local residents - such as bus and tour drivers, secretaries, messengers, accounting clerks, and the like. A question that will surely arise in the process of the audit is, is it time to expand that list? In particular, to add more demanding jobs, not merely more menial ones?

In theory, of course, all jobs held by foreign workers could be filled by local residents - if there were enough of them, and if they had the necessary training. Depending on how the audit is conducted, could it perhaps be used to encourage and persuade more islanders to further their education? To finish high school, to obtain technical licenses, to earn certification from professional associations, to go so far as to acquire a professional degree?

It might also be time to explore more seriously the concept of job-sharing - where two people share the same job, each working part-time. It has a particular applicability here where people often have heavy social and cultural responsibilities that get in the way of putting in a full 40-hour work week. The job could be shared - provided it is not between two people of the same family! - and in theory, at least, one's obligations would not affect the other, so that the job itself would be covered at all times.

Job-sharing would also help those tied to the home to take care of children, elders, or the sick. They could work part-time, with someone else filling the rest of the hours required. This might, in turn, require a closer look at job benefits. There is no reason why part-time workers should not be entitled to sick leave, health insurance, vacation time, retirement benefits, in proportion to their total hours worked.

The final audit report could also pinpoint those specific areas where a lack of skills and training prevents locals from finding jobs - where entrepreneurs and investors might find it particularly worthwhile to set up training institutes, offer apprenticeships, conduct skill-enhancing workshops.

The announcement of the private sector job audit also raises the question of what ever happened to the public sector (government) job audit that was once promised by the governor. Assuming that that audit would show that more than one government office was over-staffed, the OPA audit could have tried to match the excess government employees with private sector positions, thus providing a way absorb those excess employees who - one would hope - would

have consequently been given Reduction in Force notices, and joined the unemployed.

All of which brings to mind a study done in Indonesia last year on the potential of community-based tourism in North Sulawesi - Sulawesi being one of the islands of Indonesia - which ranked 81 island communities in four areas as to their tourism potential. The rankings were based on a survey which looked at the extent and condition of the infrastructure, of human resources, and of natural resources - particularly reefs and marine life.

The survey found that while most villages were well endowed with pristine reefs and rich marine life to offer tourists, some lacked the infrastructure, and many more were described as having a low human resource capacity. A dependency on government capital, the need for training as tourist guides, for training of souvenir artisans, for training to develop the community's understanding of tourism potential and of environmental management, the need for knowledge of tourism management and for foreign language training, the lack of understanding of laws and regulations, of hygiene, and of sanitation, and the lack of involvement in tourism activities were all identified as contributing to the "low human resource capacity."

The intent of the survey was to identify, for entrepreneurs and developers, areas that were more immediately amenable to development as tourist sites, and to identify the shortfalls, the needs, that would have to be met to bring the remaining surveyed communities up to a level where they too would be good candidates for tourism development.

But in the doing, the survey also reveals where entrepreneurs might profitably set up skill and language training institutes, workshops and seminars that would improve the so-called human resource capacity of the areas surveyed.

The study, "Survey on the Potential of Community Based Tourism in North Sulawesi (Summary/Ringkasan)" was sponsored by U.S. A.I.D., IRG and Mitra Pesisir, and was issued in 2005. The text is both in English and in Indonesian.

Maybe what the Department of Interior Office of Insular Affairs ought to focus on, instead of business opportunities, is human capacity development?

Despite the many extended discussions and debates - both formal and informal - about why tourism has declined in the CNMI and how to bring it back to the heyday of the early '90's, there does not seem a consensus on either the cause or the solution. The same is true of the decline in investors - lots of argument and debate, but no consensus as to what caused it and how to remedy it.

In the meantime, a myriad of efforts has been undertaken - from CPA's waiving fees for airlines, MVA's repeated trips to Japan and elsewhere, and permit-streamlining efforts for businesses, to the zoning board's attempt to make the Garapan area more tourist friendly. So far, they all appear random, haphazard, unrelated, and unprioritized. But perhaps, when the Marianas Visitors Authority makes its presentation about its revised five-year plan to the Chamber of Commerce next week, all will be clear.

In the meantime, it might be well to remember that investors flocked to the CNMI during the early '90's despite the Article XII restrictions, despite the cumbersome labor laws, despite infrastructure problems. The driving force was the ratio of yen to dollar, and Japan's booming economy. The argument, therefore, that the CNMI must change its laws or Constitution to attract investors is not all that valid.

No doubt, trying to do more to make it more enticing to do business here might be helpful, but at bottom, it is external conditions that will determine what happens. At the moment, it looks like the upcoming transfer of those 8,000 Marines to Guam may well be the external condition that will offer the CNMI a chance to flourish once again. The CNMI might well want to be both cautious and judicious in selecting the enticements it offers new investors, entrepreneurs in the meantime.

Short Takes:

If it weren't for a press release emanating from Saipan Southern High School, few people would know about the outstanding job done by members of its Manta Ray Battalion at the Red Cross' recent Club 200 gathering at the World Resort. As it is, the press release was relegated to page 18 of today's *Tribune*. The Battalion cadets provided not only road crossing service, but also valet parking to those attending Club 200 - they even offered a shuttle bus to those who'd had to park some distance away - a most novel concept!

Those who planned and arranged the service, as well as those who performed it, are to be commended for the thoughtful, useful, and unique service they offered the rest of the community.

Surely such good deeds deserve at least as much prominence as the sometimes lurid tales of wrong-doing that one finds in the paper!

*

It is unfortunate that, as the zoning board struggles with the challenge of trying to cleaning up Garapan, and particularly the Paseo area, to make it more comfortable, attractive to tourists, the simplest solution is not available to the board. Declaring prostitution legal, and legislating control and oversight of the "world's oldest profession" sure would make the job a lot easier. None of the euphemisms for "adult" this and that would be necessary. The language could be simple and straightforward: prostitution is only allowed in certain areas, and must be indicated by whatever labels the board chooses to prescribe. But that would fly in the face of Catholicism's dicta, and unless the legislature and the governor are strong enough to separate church and state in this instance, the zoning board will be left to struggle as best it can.

*

The community has seemingly already lost the battle to establish a public market in Garapan. The Northern Marianas Housing Corporation announced this week that funds set aside for the market have been re-programmed for use in improving the Susupe sports complex. NMHC officials explained that the federal funds would be lost if not used, and that no progress had been made on the public market.

*

Five new movies this week for a total of 5 PG-13's, 2 PG's - and only one PG-13 of any redeeming value. What a pity!