

On My Mind  
11/03/06

CNMI leaders must have a very low opinion of what the CNMI has to offer tourists - they are going to the Department of Interior-sponsored "business opportunities" conference in Hawaii ten days from now hoping to find national franchise and other brand-name stores interested in setting up shop in the CNMI. Apparently they believe that having more shopping malls selling known brand-name merchandise will be good for tourism.

Yet no other tropical tourist attraction that I know of advertises its shopping malls. Not Bali, not Hawaii, not Palau, not Tahiti, not even Guam. Such shopping malls are for large, metropolitan areas like Manila, HongKong, Singapore - not tropical islands. Tropical islands have distinct features of their own - clear waters, colorful and plentiful marine life, large stretches of white sand beach, and all the water sports that go with the surrounding ocean. The CNMI has an added fillip - historical ties to numerous foreign countries like Spain, Germany, Japan, and to World War II, and its relationship to the U.S.

So why aren't CNMI's leaders seeking ways to enhance the CNMI's unique niche attraction? or for entrepreneurs who can help the people of the CNMI achieve a sustainable economy and attract tourists? Why aren't they looking for, for example, people like this year's Nobel Peace Prize winners Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank - who started a program of micro-loans to help people earn their own living? Wouldn't that be more helpful in the CNMI - where unemployment is a major problem? In turn, micro-loans could help islanders set up tourist-related businesses - like making jewelry from coconuts, sea shells or pandanus leaves, like ferries between Saipan and Tinian, like offering tours of historic sites, like offering baby-sitting to tourists, like serving as "vandalism cops" at tourist sights, like setting up an independent movie house that would attract tourists as well as residents. Especially since the Commonwealth Development Corporation is considering a moratorium on issuing its loans. (Of course, the CDA never considered micro-loans....)

The CNMI's strength lies in its being a tropical island. Not in trying to be a shopping mecca. Especially with the dollar not always doing well against foreign currency, that is an iffy business to begin with. Tourists can often find the same thing cheaper elsewhere.....

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PTI's Ricky Delgado wrote, in a letter carried by both papers, that what the CNMI needs is - to carry out his analogy - more "ants." The more ants/people, the better off the CNMI will be, he contends, because they will share the burden of paying for taxes, CUC's fuel, etc. First of all, ants are workers - and the CNMI doesn't really need a larger worker-level population. It needs professional level people - engineers, teachers, librarians, CPA's, doctors - and it needs the educational base to produce them.

Secondly, the more semi-permanent people on island, the greater the threat to the islands' culture - important not only in its own right, but also because it provides its own distinctive flavor to tourism. And lastly, if the government were smaller, the burden of taxes, etc., to keep it going would be less, so the better solution might be to downsize government, not "upsize" the general population!

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Now that the House bill creating the Public Utilities Commission has been signed into law, the least the legislature could do is pass an amendment adding the policy statements that were part of the rejected Senate substitute bill. Public Law 15-35, as passed, contains no findings, no policies, no statements of purpose - in either the "prologue" to the law, or anywhere within the body of the law. The Senate version did, however, which could be quite useful to anyone having to adjucate or interpret the law hereafter.

Some of the potentially useful, and reassuring, statements included in the "Findings" of the Senate substitute:

<EM><STRONG>"The Legislature finds that, in order to provide our people with a proper standard of living, the Commonwealth must produce and distribute electricity efficiently, reliably and cost-effectively while protecting our environment and protecting those of our citizens who are most at risk economically."

"We must have a fair way to address our energy production and consumption. Those who make and distribute the energy we use must be fairly compensated for it. Those who buy the energy must pay a fair price for an efficiently provided service. These principles must apply whether our electric company is publicly or privately owned."

"The Commonwealth must develop ways to conserve energy, produce it more cheaply and efficiently, and explore alternative energy sources."

"The fair and profitable functioning of these additional utilities [sewage treatment, water, telecommunications] is essential to the CNMI's ability to thrive economically, including attracting tourists and new businesses. Together with electricity they are key elements of our infrastructure. Their services must be safe, adequate and reliable. Their prices must be reasonable."

"The quality of regulation is of utmost importance. The producing and consuming public must have confidence that the CNMI's regulator is fair, deliberate and competent. The regulator must be perceived to, and must actually, operate efficiently and in the public interest."

"It is the policy of the Legislature that the rates, fees and charges of the[sic] Saipan, Tinian and Rota shall not vary merely by reasons of location and geography."</EM></STRONG>.

The "Purposes" section - without the sentences dealing with the Commonwealth Telecommunications Commission since P.L. 15-35 abolished it - is also meaningful:

<EM><STRONG>"The Purposes of this Act are to Create a Commonwealth Public Utilities Commission which will fairly and efficiently regulate electricity, water, wastewater and sewage treatment, and telephone and wireless telecommunications, as well as their inter-relationships;... make the present CTC commissioners the initial members of the new Public Utilities Commission in order to benefit from their demonstrated regulatory expertise; ensure that regulated utilities are given a fair opportunity to recover the costs of service, including an opportunity to earn a fair return on reasonable and prudent investment, while customers are given reliable, adequate and safe service at just and reasonable rates, fees and charges; ensure that the procedures for serving customers, including dispute resolution, are fair and reasonable; provide the Public Utilities Commission with the necessary power, autonomy and resources to carry out its duties, while at the same time requiring strict adherence by its members and staff to high ethical standards; require the Commission to make timely, expeditious decisions; provide that the Commonwealth's Consumer Counsel will represent adequately the interests of customers before the Commission; offer aggrieved parties an

opportunity to appeal Commission decisions; and provide that this Act will take immediate effect."<STRONG></EM>.

While admittedly such statements do not have the force of law, they nevertheless can provide helpful background and guidelines when it comes to interpretation of the law.

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The vandalism and theft (a volunteer's car was broken into and a camera stolen) at Suicide Cliff while volunteers - mostly Japanese - were busy cleaning the site is disheartening, to say the least. What a shame! What bad publicity! What disgusting behavior!

Obviously, much more strenuous steps must be taken than is currently the practice, if the CNMI has any hopes of assuring tourists that they are safe when visiting tourist sites, when walking down the street, when on island - wherever they are. A three-pronged attack would seem most effective: increase police presence - which is admittedly difficult, considering limited budgets; develop a corps of vandalism cops similar to the "litter cops" that have been trained and certified under the Beautify CNMI! aegis, where volunteers authorized to issue tickets would cover tourist sites; and provide more education to tourists on "how to be safe in the CNMI." This could include, for example, advising them to always designate one of their members to stand watch over cars parked at tourist sites, and suggesting they always hold their purses close to their bodies, or carry their valuables in safety belts under their clothing.

It would, of course, also be useful if involvement by tourist guides and taxi drivers were obtained. They are, after all, as dependent on a successful tourism industry as everyone else, so it does not seem unreasonable to also hold them accountable for tourist safety. That might take some education and training, but it should pay off in the long run if it increased tourist safety on island.

As the agency responsible for promoting tourism in the CNMI, Marianas Visitors Authority, are you listening?????

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Short takes:

Looks like Willie Tan is picking up some of the tricks the governor has been using (or is it the other way around?) - making threats in order to win favorable action. Tan announced that he will be getting out of the poker machine business, which would be a blow to government revenue - but now that the administration has announced it might lower poker fees, seems like Tan is reconsidering.....

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Would the Rotary Club consider opening its proposed skate-board park to tourists as well? The park has been proposed by Rotary as a service to the community - as an activity for the island's youth - and it's a great idea - long overdue. It is admittedly not within the purview of the Rotary Club to provide facilities for tourists, but since there is an on-going need to provide additional activities for tourists, might not a skate-boarding park meet that need as well? It would also provide a great opportunity for the local community and tourists to meet in another activity of mutual interest. MVA, are you listening?

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Movies of the week: same old, same old, with only one new one - the mediocre "Santa Claus III" rated R by the *Variety*, and G by the *Tribune*. (The *Trib* has it right.)

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