

On My Mind
11/15/06

It will be interesting to see what the "junket boys" come back with after having attended that Department of Interior-sponsored conference on investment opportunities that took place in Hawaii this past week. Once upon a time, people who went off on such trips were expected to report back to those who stayed behind, sharing their experiences and what they'd learned. The thought was that though not everyone could go, at least those who didn't would still get some benefit. And after all the money that was spent this time, a full report to fellow legislators, to government agency heads, to the Chamber of Commerce, to the community at large, would certainly seem called for.

Ideally, they'd all hold a joint press conference, and invite the public to attend.

I can't help feeling that the agenda for those conferences - to the extent that it is affected by the interns the DoI sends out to the various islands - is flawed. The interns may be academically gifted, but short stints of a few days "out in the field" cannot begin to bring comprehension and understanding of the realities here, or anywhere else they visit. Text-book solutions don't work, except in text books, in the classroom.

Admittedly, it's only a feeling, since the recommendations made by the interns are never made public but kept within the confines of the DoI. This is both good and bad. It is good, because it allows opinions, recommendations, to be made openly, frankly, without a need to be careful of what one says (witness the fuss, not so long ago, about "paradigms" when one intern strayed from the rule). But it is bad because the impressions gained by the interns are never verified, much less cross-checked, by those involved and affected. It is all too easy to come up with skewed conclusions based on a brief visit, when, for example, such visitors spend most of their time in comfortable hotel settings.

I would offer as prime example of the error of first impression the concern most visitors have with a water system that does not provide the CNMI with safe drinking water. They assume that safe drinking water is the CNMI's top priority, based on their own perceptions. And so it gets put on the top of their list of what constitute the CNMI's priority needs. But in the CNMI the opposite is true - it has NEVER been a given that tap water is safe to drink. Here, it's simply a fact of life. Far higher on the list of priorities is having any water at all 24 hours a day, having reliable power 24 hours a day, a sewage disposal system that doesn't pollute, an education system that prepares its students for gainful employment, to mention just a few..

Lower on a list of priorities, but not by much, is the need to improve the financial infrastructure. If my own experience is any indication, local or foreign investors must have a terrible time trying to conduct financial transactions in the CNMI. Not only do many businesses refuse to deal with anyone who does not have a street address - my desire to buy certificates of deposit on-line was flat-out rejected by one otherwise reputable company solely on the grounds that I had no street address and house number. I could have "lied," and made one up, and I

occasionally do, as I know others do as well, but the fact remains that it is an obstacle.

On another occasion, a stock transaction required what is called a "medallion bank signature guarantee stamp." I'm not sure whether it was just my bank, or would have been true of others on-island, but obtaining the required stamp turned into a major hassle, not only the first time, but on subsequent occasions as well.

And of course, there is little in the way of investment opportunity (securities, certificate of deposit, etc.), except in land, available at all - other than through the internet.

It doesn't seem much talked about, but if the CNMI hopes to offer an investor-friendly environment to new businesses, it would appear that the financial sector needs some reforming too - some modernization and improvement.

Another thing the CNMI needs that's never mentioned is a good bookstore. At least there's Bestseller, but it doesn't begin to meet the needs of the community, or, I dare say, the tourists either. The number of books by and about the Marianas - its history, its traditions, its ecology and environment, its development, is pitiful. Books about the rest of the Pacific are practically non-existent. It's true that one can order books through the internet fairly easily, but that's often like buying blind - one can't look at the table of contents, at the size of the print, feel the page.

Last night's Humanities Council program on probate underscored the need for a good bookstore. The program drew a standing-room only crowd at the American Memorial Park Theater - a first, I believe, for the Council. Obviously, many people in the community are very interested in, concerned about, estate settlement, wills, court procedures and all the other things involved in probate. In fact, it became clear that many are not happy with current requirements of the process.

There are any number of books, manuals, forms, available about how to avoid probate - but they're not available in Bestseller. Nor are books on how to prepare wills. A good bookstore would have had several titles in stock. Not that I am advocating doing it on one's own. There's often a lot at stake. But one can do the leg work, gather the information, prepare the basic document. And then take it to an attorney, to make sure everything is in order. That way one doesn't incur such a huge bill from the attorney - it shouldn't take more than an hour for the review.

Given the absence of a bookstore, a good source of such books is www.nolopress.com, a nationally-recognized publisher of legal self-help books.

I do not mean to slight our public library here. The JoeTen Kiyu Library is an outstanding source of materials of all kinds for all levels of user, for all interests. But there are occasions, such as in drawing up a trust, where one not only wants to keep a book handy for longer than the library loan period, but also wants to underline and highlight or otherwise mark it up. At such times, only a bookstore can fill the need.

I can hardly drop the subject of things the CNMI needs without mentioning that it also needs a good alternative movie house.....

The *Saipan Tribune* finally did it! It printed the entire table of contents for the latest issue of the *Commonwealth Register* in its pages. (See page 7 of the 11/14 issue.) The table of contents is available on the net - but awkwardly. And its publication is important because that's where agency rules are published to allow for the required 30-day public comment period. If people don't know the rules have been published, they cannot comment.

The *Trib* published the table of contents not because an agency of government sent it to the paper, but because the Chamber of Commerce, which subscribes to the *Register*, provides a copy to its members. Both the paper and the Chamber are to be congratulated for displaying such civic responsibility!

Short takes:

While re-instating U.S. Social Security would be a boon to government employees, looks like it won't happen any time soon. The CNMI government would be required to match employees' payments 50-50 - something it can ill afford at the moment. In addition, the payment would take another bite out of worker salaries, something most workers would not be happy about either. Nor can Social Security be applied to only certain sectors - such as retirees. It is mandated to apply to all government employees.

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Are the CNMI's Public School System PRAXIS score requirements higher or lower than those of mainland schools? Some say yes, some say no. The answer is supposed to be available on PSS's web page, but I couldn't find it. Why doesn't PSS, or its Board, simply publish the table of score requirements? Let everyone see what the argument is all about?

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What is going on with the CUC Request for Proposal for privatization of power? At this late date, YEARS after the project was first proposed, there's still no agreement on a scope of work? on whether transmission and distribution will be included? on land requirements? Who's not listening to whom? and why aren't they?

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On a brighter note, two worthy causes have joined hands - Crime Stoppers has offered to work with Beautify CNMI in making its anonymous 24-hour call-in service available for reporting not only theft, burglary, shootings and the like, but environmental crimes as well - such as illegal dumping, illegal fishing, illegal waste oil disposal, etc. Anyone seeing any kind of crime being committed, or having knowledge of one, can now call a single number - 234-7272 - at any time of day or night, to anonymously report the crime.

Two hotels, one private business, one government agency, one individual family, and seven not-for-profit groups have signed up for Beautify CNMI's adopt-a-beach, adopt-a-road program. The group is still looking for volunteers - there's lots more road and beach-front to cover.....

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Lastly, is there any interest out there in forming a Eudora (e-mail system) users group on Saipan? I occasionally get hung up on one thing or another, and the computer gurus don't seem to have all that much familiarity with it. I know, I could switch, but I've got SO much invested in Eudora.....If so, let me know!

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Movies this week: Two new ones, a new James Bond rated "PG-13," and a pretty good animated "adventure" incorrectly rated "G" by the Variety and "PG" by the Tribune (according to www.rottentomatoes.com), in addition to the remaining action thriller, horror thriller and action drama - all "PG-13" - an animated comedy rated "PG," and a poorly rated family comedy rated "G."

"On My Mind" can also be found on the web at <<http://net.saipan.com/cftem-plates/omm/index.cfm>>, at <www.chamorro.com> or at <www.cnmi.net> (just click on "News & Weather"). If you missed a column due to an overfull mailbox or whatever, you can find it in the "Archives" section.

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