

On My Mind  
12/01/06

The Workforce Development Summit held yesterday brought forth a lot of information - from the Public School System, Northern Marianas College, the CNMI's student body and its private sector, from national and local labor agencies. Bringing representatives of the many sectors together - there were a number of legislators in attendance as well - was a major achievement all its own. But it tried to do too many things, based on some faulty assumptions, and did not draw enough distinctions between its conflicting goals to be entirely successful.

The idea was to identify CNMI's employment needs, so that support institutions could identify what they needed to do to, in turn, to create a work force that met those needs. Unfortunately, the framework used to identifying employment needs was CNMI Labor and Immigration's list of top 25 unskilled and top 30 skilled positions filled by non-residents, rather than a framework that would allow for a more open assessment of what kinds of skills the CNMI needs if it is to improve its economy, enhance tourism, attract investors.

Instead of recognizing the CNMI's dependence on tourism, which requires preservation of its natural beauty, history and culture; recognizing its present dependency on expensive fuels, resolution of which requires knowledge of biology, engineering, architecture, physics, and the like; recognizing its intent to develop economically which requires sophisticated information technologies, media capabilities, and financial services; recognizing its significant health problems which require the service of medical professionals; and recognizing its need for adequate numbers of knowledgeable and effective educational professionals - in other words, striving toward a different future - the focus was on what is, where things now stand. There was no room for discussion of either positions to fill such needs, or what would be needed to produce a work force competent in those areas.

Another goal of the summit was to identify areas where, given sufficient training, the local work force could perhaps replace some of the foreign workers now employed in the CNMI.

However, such an approach sets severe limits on employment options and opportunities for that local work force. The unskilled (defined as needing less than 6 months of training) list was topped by garment workers (sewers, pressers, cutters, packers), housekeepers, cleaners, waiters and waitresses, cooks, farm workers..... The skilled (defined as needing more than 6 months of training, education) list was topped by accountant, maintenance worker, managers (one wonders at the accuracy of the label), carpenters, masons, salespersons.....in fact, jobs that most people in the local work force would probably not be all that interested in.

In consequence, PSS and NMC were tasked with improving instruction in work ethics, life skills, in basic math and language skills, with improving counseling services, rather than tasked with strengthening their programs in environment and ecology, in media skills, in health care, financial services, information technology.

The question of job interest by people in the local work force will no doubt come up again when the results of the Office of the Public Auditor's study on job availability in the private sector is released later this month.

NMC's Small Business Development Center, the Work Force Investment Agency and Eric Plinske, head of the SBDC and the summit's leader, deserve praise for bringing all the disparate groups together, for providing such a wealth of data and accompanying documents, for the smooth functioning of the break-out sessions, for attracting so many attendees, for running

such a smooth conference over-all. It's too bad that its focus wasn't better defined, so that PSS and NMC don't walk away thinking they have no obligation to support broader career opportunities.

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I should know better than to tangle with such a long-time observer of Washington politics as is Fred Radewagen! He let me know in no uncertain terms that he was not trying to be amusing in chiding me for using "mainland" when what I really meant was "stateside." I had used the term in a column two weeks ago, and defended myself - when he wrote to question my use of the word - by saying it was in widespread use here. In his next e-mail, he reminded me that that is no excuse for using what some would view as unacceptable language. He's right, and I shall try to do better.

I had said the CNMI will be tainted by its Republican affiliation when the Democrats are sworn in in January, to which he responded that "the current CNMI administration, which is lead by the Covenant Party, has no ties to any national political party." I had disagreed, saying everyone knows that Fitial, at heart, is still Republican, as are many of his supporters, to which Radewagen then said that it's the label that counts - that "once Ben Fitial left the CNMI Republican Party, and the CNMI Republican Party affiliated nationally, the national party no longer considered him a Republican, no matter how much he contributes financially. He would not be welcome, for example, to meet with the Republican governors when they gather separately to plot political strategy at National Governors Association meetings."

I'd rashly said that I thought it a pretty remote possibility that the Republicans could win the next presidential election, and was told that assertion was not supportable by any facts he had seen, and that not a single national political analyst believes that the Republicans have only a "remote" chance of winning in 2008.

And he corrected another of my notions by saying, "No serious observer would expect that whether CNMI leaders' ties are with ... the Republican or [the] Democratic Part[y] is going to affect whether George Miller is going to push for minimum wage legislation." "But," he continues, "how that bill looks or if it even passes both houses and gets signed into law very well may depend on CNMI's ability to argue its case to legislators and administration officials...."

He wrote much more, which I won't go into. Suffice to say I'll comment on politics in Washington with a great deal more caution than I have in the past!

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Short takes:

The Western Pacific Academy of Science and Environmental Management offered its Second Annual Symposium on Wednesday and Thursday of this past week. Topics covered included heavy metals in Tanapag Lagoon, mercury and arsenic in popular food fish from Tanapag Lagoon, a look at habitat and density of particular sea anemones in Saipan's water, using a social marketing approach in coral reef education in the CNMI, biofuels in an island context, goat eradication on Sarigan, and determining the feasibility of avoiding coral destruction by "farming" feather dusters to meet a large commercial demand.

Two of the speakers were from the University of Hawaii, one from Brigham Young

University in Hawaii, one from Guam's Water and Environmental Research Institute, and three from the CNMI. Though open to the general public, only a handful attended what turned out to be some fascinating presentations. Perhaps next time, better promotion will enable more people to attend. More information can be obtained from John Furey at [johnf@nmcnet.edu](mailto:johnf@nmcnet.edu) or Simon Habegger at [simon@nmcnet.edu](mailto:simon@nmcnet.edu) or Andre Kozij at [akaspn@hotmail.com](mailto:akaspn@hotmail.com).

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With the change in the calendar - this is December 1<sup>st</sup>, lit-up Christmas decorations have suddenly appeared along Beach Road, all the way north to Tanapag (I've not gone further to see if they extend to Marpi), along with a huge tree in front of the Susupe multi-purpose center. I'm torn between worrying about the cost (who paid?) and power demand (how many kilowatts?) and welcoming the colorful reminders of the holiday season.

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The Arts Council has opened its Christmas show, featuring several artists not seen on Saipan before. Unfortunately, the show is only open during normal duty hours. The Arts Council is attempting to provide volunteer effort to keep it open longer, and over the week-end, but has run into bureaucratic red tape. "Certain governmental procedures, security concerns, logistical issues (does someone from their office need to return to officially "close"?)" must first be dealt with, I was told.

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I find it a little baffling that the Coastal Resource Management Office would take such a punitive approach to the small boats kept along the beach front. If it is true, as has been maintained, that they are used only find fish for family consumption, banning the boats imposes a hardship on their owners. It seems to me it would have been far more in keeping with island ways if CRMO had proposed assessing a small license fee, and/or establishing designated areas where the boats could conveniently kept. Moreover, they are not visible from the road - I wonder whose sight they offend?

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The Marianas Visitors Authority has finally decided to support security guards at selected Marpi tourist sites. My phone call to MVA was not returned, so I am left wondering whether the guards will only be there from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Mondays through Fridays? Or whether they will cover all the daylight hours - and in particular those hours when tour buses are not there, all seven days of the week? Or whether the idea of roving guards, not on a regular schedule, but covering all Marpi sites, all daylight hours, all days of the week, was considered?

A guard a friend and I encountered at Banzai just sat there, evidently bored to tears. We also saw cigarette butts and other trash on the grass. He could have relieved the boredom by picking them up but it apparently did not occur to him, nor was he instructed by his employer to do so. A pity.

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I get upset each time one of the neighborhood boonie dogs comes in heat, and is then harassed by testosterone-hyped males. Doesn't anyone take pity? But I found out that to spay a small female dog costs \$250 or more, and to fix a male only slightly less. Nor is there any program in place to subsidize such surgeries. Though I thought Tinian's approach rather harsh of euthanizing stray dogs if no one claimed them, I no longer do. The Saipan mayor's office would do well to do the same.

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Movies this week: 2 new PG's, one labeled drama-religion, the other comedy; one new PG-13 labeled action thriller; 2 hold-over PG-13's, one an action drama, the other action adventure (wonder what the difference is?); and 2 hold-over PG's, one an animated comedy, and the other an animated adventure.

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