

On My Mind
12/15/06

Pristine. Just the other day that over-worked word was used yet again to describe what makes the CNMI attractive to tourists. "Pristine," one should note, is described in the New Oxford American Dictionary, 2nd edition, as "in its original condition; unspoiled; clean and fresh as if new." Can anyone in all honesty describe the present condition of Saipan's waters - or its beaches - as pristine?

Former Supreme Court Justice Jose S. Dela Cruz asks, in his thoughtful letter to the editor printed by both papers, "where did the CNMI go wrong?" "What can be done to try and turn things around?" To the extent that the CNMI wishes to attract more tourists, the answer would seem obvious: restore the lagoon and beaches to their previous pristine condition. However, while Beautify CNMI! is headed in that direction, it will take far more than volunteer effort to bring it about. Just one example: the Mariana Islands Nature Alliance and Beautify CNMI!, among others, have worked to make Obyan Beach attractive as well as an example of sound ecological principles with its protection of turtle nesting sites. Yet the only way to get there is on a road that is rutted and full of pot holes, creating destructive run-off that pollutes the water, smothers the coral. All that's needed to solve the problem, and help restore pristine-ness to Obyan, is to pave the road. But there are apparently no plans on the books to do so, to resolve the run-off problem. If the CNMI is serious in promoting tourism, shouldn't its Capital Improvement Program priorities reflect that intention?

Another example: the long-standing drainage ditch next to the Fiesta Hotel in Garapan.....

Others talk about finding a niche, a brand, that can identify and differentiate Saipan and the CNMI from other tourist destinations. Here, rather than a lesson from Guam, as DelaCruz suggest, the CNMI might better look at its neighbor to the southwest. "Palau," says a headline in yesterday's *Marianas Variety* "will remain environment friendly." There isn't any reason the CNMI couldn't share that claim with Palau. The Micronesian Challenge began in Palau, but the CNMI supports it as well. The CNMI has already established marine protected areas. And they are working - the marine habitat is healing, the marine life increasing. With the increasing concern about global warming, sinking islands and declining species, wouldn't a tourist destination that advertised itself as actively addressing ecological concerns, as supporting the environment, as being ecologically accountable and responsive, be increasingly appealing? Why couldn't that be the CNMI's niche? All it would take is marketing of that angle, that perspective - along with greater support of it as well.

In fact, the CNMI could advertise opportunities for tourists to take part in the process. If tourists are on island during Beautify CNMI! cleanups, they could be invited along, to pick up trash, to paint over graffiti, to plant trees. Tourists could even be enlisted to help survey marine populations as they dive and snorkel - so they could feel part of the battle against global warming - and the campaign to restore CNMI waters to their former pristine condition.

It isn't marketing trips to Japan that will increase tourist traffic. It's doing the homework here.

A quick technological tip that will also help: link to <www.welovesaipan.com>.

A holdover from the recent workforce summit which was called, among other reasons, to try identify what the Public School System and Northern Marianas College could do to better prepare their graduates for entry into the work place: Absent from the many things suggested for the two institutions was the need for data on their "productivity." Are there, within PSS, statistics that track individual students? That show their rate of gain from year to year? Are there statistics that show how well high school graduates - from public and private schools do - or do not do? On how many students who enter NMC obtain a certificate or degree? On how many who transfer from NMC to four-year colleges actually acquire a BA or BS? On how many who go directly from island school systems to colleges elsewhere do? On how those rates compare to similar institutions elsewhere?

How can either system evaluate its effectiveness, its success in producing educated, capable members of society, if it doesn't have such data? How can either system properly evaluate the effectiveness of its teachers, its faculty, without such data? If it does have such data, should it not be shared more openly - so that parents and the community may also evaluate the systems?

It's rather depressing to read some of the "Flashback" items that the *Saipan Tribune* has been running of late. Just this past week, one story told of the Commonwealth Development Authority wanting to re-write the Request for Proposal for an 80-megawatt power plant which the Commonwealth Utilities Commission had issued. Dateline for the story was December 13, 1999. Can you imagine? For the past SEVEN years, attempts have been made to issue an RFP for replacement of CNMI's deteriorating power plant! And still the RFP gets tossed back and forth, not yet acted upon. It is frightening to contemplate what will happen if the issuance of an RFP continues to be delayed. Once the power plant fails altogether, then what?

When will reasonable people sit down and hammer out a reasonable RFP that a responsible firm might actually be willing to respond to? Where is the leadership to make this happen? Must there be mass protest first?

The second depressing item this past week was the one about the Department of Lands and Natural Resources' intent to establish a fisheries complex in an area across the street from the Kristo Rai Church in Garapan. The project was envisioned as a permanent downtown central market where fishermen and farmers could sell their fish and agricultural produce. That story was datelined December 13, 2000. Just imagine. If that had been approved, the CNMI would now have a flourishing market attractive to tourists and residents alike, already built and operating. Instead, all that there is is a vague hope that someone might come build a hotel there - a backward notion if there ever was one. It makes no sense to build a hotel for tourists that will consume resources, pollute lagoon and beach front, destroy open view corridors, instead of putting in place a new tourist attraction that can also offer direct benefit to the local community.

More upbeat: A local businessman has launched an effort to provide this year's CNMI Teacher of the Year with the same \$5,000 award all CNMI Teachers of the Year have received since the program started in 1993. The award is given annually by the Public School System,

which, this year, declared that it did not have enough money to offer more than \$1,000 to the awardee.

Bud White, President and CEO of White Coconut Computing, has established a Teacher of the Year Foundation as depository for funds he is soliciting from anyone interested in seeing that this year's CNMI and Tanapag Teacher of the Year, Acelia Dela Cruz, receives the full \$5,000 award that all previous recipients have been given. To set the ball rolling, White has donated the first \$1,000, in the form of computer equipment.

White said he believed the community has a responsibility to support education and to show its appreciation to outstanding teachers such as Dela Cruz. As quoted in a *Variety* story about the fund-raising, White said, "That way we also show our support for the children on this island. This island has been good to me. My business is successful. I am living in a beautiful village and this is my way of giving back."

Those interested in contributing towards Dela Cruz' award are asked to call White at 322-9443, or send him an e-mail at <bud@whitecoconut.com>.

Concern is growing that the "austerity holidays" are doing more harm than good. Not only in terms of family sufferings, and in terms of the impact of their decreased spending on the local economy, but also in terms of government productivity - at least on a federal level. Federal grants given to the CNMI require products, output, the creation of which, in turn, requires personpower. But if work hours are decreased, meeting the output requirements becomes that much more difficult - besides reducing the amount of federal funds that enter the CNMI economy.

Since the CNMI government workforce is so bloated, one might ask whether the same applies to the local government - whether its products, services, output are also being reduced, and if so, to what extent.

Wouldn't it be more logical, practical, workable, to simply make the CNMI's existing paid holidays real "austerity" holidays, and cancel the spurious alternate-Friday "austerity holidays"?

Short takes:

A grossly neglected area bordering the Paseo in Garapan is Date Road, behind the Taste of India restaurant. Perhaps the fact that no business fronts on it explains the neglect, but the street is a mess - only partially paved, and the ruts where it isn't getting deeper and deeper. The street was torn up for some utility work or other, and never repaved, making its puddles a breeding ground for mosquitos as well as an obstacle course for automobiles. The street is in constant use, for deliveries, as an exit from the shops at its upper end, as a parking space. Will it ever be repaired? I have not been able to get through to the Division of Roads and Grounds to find out.

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The Coastal Resource Management Office is still running its notice in the papers that small boat owners who leave their boats along the lagoon-front must remove their "litter" or else, despite published protests. What does it take to get CRMO to back off? To adjust its priorities, and put its energies into real problems, like the on-going pollution from the Garapan drainage ditch, rather than the livelihood of local fishermen?

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Movies this week: one new PG. The web site www.rottentomatoes.com lists five new releases for the week. In order of "freshness:" "Dream Girls," "Charlotte's Web," "Pursuit of Happyness," "The Good German," "Eragon." Which one did Saipan get? the bottom of the barrel, "Eragon."

"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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