

On My Mind  
12/22/06

For obvious reasons, I don't ordinarily make a wish list of what I'd like Santa to bring, but it seemed as good a vehicle as any, so here goes. First and foremost, I'd like to find in my stocking this year a fully signed and executed contract with an established, reputable, company for the immediate privatization of CUC's power system - one without any CDA strings. I think I'd even be willing to give up all my other wishes, if that one were to come true.

The rest of the list:

- leadership, in this time of crisis, from someone with backbone, integrity, intelligence, resolve;
- prudent legislators who understand and care about the needs of the CNMI as a whole, and who know how to and actually do prioritize action on bills accordingly;
- the reconstitution of the Marianas Visitors Authority with members who really do understand what eco-tourism is, and have the ability - and willingness - to interpret destination enhancement outside the box of commercialism;
- reduction in the size of government;
  - paving of the road to Obyan, along with ponding basins to stop the erosion and pollution;
- elimination of the drainage ditch next to the Fiesta in Garapan;
- abolition of austerity Fridays;
- imposition of a modest sales tax on everything except medicines, books and perishable food-stuffs;
- repair of sewer outfalls in the lagoon;
- re-location of the Thursday street market to a more accessible site;
- construction of the fishermen and farmers market across from Kristo Rai church in Garapan - to eventually include the Thursday street market;
- smart water meters that do what they were supposed to do - be readable from the car;
- mass transportation;
- residential trash pick-up;
- amendment to the Article XII to extend permissible land leases to 75 or 80 years;
- sidewalks along all highways;
- environmentally and ecologically appropriate development of the Northern Islands.

That's probably already more than anyone could hope for, but there is yet more, both on a local and on a global scale: a wish for better leadership in Washington, a wish for an end to global warming, a wish for peace, to name just a few. Hope springs eternal, as they say....

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Is it a reflection of intelligent leadership, of either prudence or an awareness of priorities, when the administration spends untold monies to again hire a DC lobbyist in an effort to fight off U.S. Congressional attempts to raise the CNMI minimum wage? I don't think so. Countless millions have already been spent on this effort, and to no avail. The issue was not resolved. The subject is again on Congress' agenda.

The CNMI might better wake up and face facts: that the CNMI minimum wage has not been adjusted in years and is now unacceptably low, that hiring a lobbyist may postpone the increase, but it won't stop it from eventually being implemented, and that Congress will, eventu-

ally, raise the CNMI's minimum wage if the CNMI does not do so first; in short, that an increase in the CNMI's minimum wage is unavoidable, inevitable.

Rather than spending all that money on a lobbyist, the administration might better spend it on educating the several components of the local community - including legislators and businessmen - on the need for and impact of an increase in the minimum wage, and on finding a way to implement a realistic minimum wage that is acceptable to all concerned.

The issue is not going to go away. It makes no sense to continue to throw away good money to try and make it do so. If the administration does not want others to arbitrarily impose a minimum wage on the CNMI, its only recourse is to itself raise the minimum wage, on terms it can live with.

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It's probably uncharitable, particularly at this time of year, to observe that the legislature's acting speaker may have a good public relations person on his staff - the acting speaker's picture, along with a story about yet another a bill he has proposed or opposed, has been appearing in the pages of the local media with some frequency - but that whoever assists the acting speaker in framing those positions would appear mis-guided, to say the least.

The latest from the acting speaker is his opposition to a bill that would allow the Public School System to hire non-U.S.-citizens to fill the several vacancies - primarily in the special education field - that still exist this school year. According to the acting speaker, there are plenty of school aides and the like who can be trained to fill those positions, thus eliminating the need for hiring non-citizens.

The point is, however, that that training takes time. It isn't a matter of a few hours, or a few weeks. It could take years to bring such staff up to par, qualified to take on the position of special ed teacher. In the meantime, it doesn't make any sense to punish the teachers, the students and the parents by doing without, by using unqualified substitute teachers to baby-sit the special ed classes. The acting speaker, himself a former member of PSS, should know better!

Another recent example of a poor bill is the acting speaker's proposal to abolish bonding companies that issue labor bonds, on the grounds that the companies are not able to meet the costs the bonds are intended to cover, like foreign worker repatriation. His solution: that the government take over. But if the government takes over, what makes him think it will be any more capable of meeting the costs? The government is already short of funds. The answer lies in strengthening the law and monitoring the bond companies to make sure they do keep the resources available for use when needed, not adding another debt to the government.

In the absence of leadership anywhere else in government, it would be nice if the acting speaker were to turn his attention to the much more pressing issue of the precarious nature of our power system, the most critical and immediate problem now facing the CNMI.

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While both the Department of Public Health and the Department of Public Safety have issued warnings about the risks and dangers of fireworks, neither went so far as to suggest that perhaps the solution lies in going a little further, and actually regulating their use. As was pointed out in an astute letter to the editor by William Hunter in Tuesday's *Saipan Tribune*, in addition to a physical risk to those setting off the fireworks, there is also an economic cost. Not

only are those big signs and trailers offensive to tourists (as well as local residents), but the shooting off of the fireworks at all times of day and night is even more so. With tourism a mainstay of the economy, the people of the CNMI should show more consideration of tourists than to allow such pollution of sight and sound, argues Hunter.

However, the House of Representatives has recessed for the holiday. The chances of their remembering, upon their return, to do anything about controlling the fireworks is remote indeed.

Let's hope, nonetheless, that it will not take the loss of an eye, or fingers, or a fatality, before tighter controls are enacted.

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While on the subject of tourists and tourism, have you clicked on <[www.welovesaipan.com](http://www.welovesaipan.com)> yet? The site was initiated at the suggestion of the most creative person I know, island newcomer Walt Goodridge. He got upset that in internet searches of the word "Saipan," that infamous uncomplimentary site was among the first ten to appear. Why, he wondered, couldn't a positive counter-site be established, that would kick the other off the top ten list? The result? Walt and Angelo "Can Do" Villagomez's "we love saipan" url. Click on it, add to it, link to it! Help get a positive view of Saipan up on the web!

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On a more somber note, in these dire times, both locally and globally, I find it difficult to extend the usual holiday wishes of "peace on earth" and "happy holidays" with any degree of sincerity. So, this year, I shall abstain.

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Movies this week: FIVE new ones!!! of which four are PG's, and one the inevitable R. The two holdovers: one PG, one PG-13. Quite a nice Christmas present.....

*"On My Mind" can also be found on the web at <<http://net.saipan.com/cftem-plates/omm/index.cfm>>, at <[www.chamorro.com](http://www.chamorro.com)> or at <[www.cnmi.net](http://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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