

## On My Mind

1/26/07

How far is it possible to carry an analogy? Former Justice Jose DelaCruz suggested that the CNMI economy be considered a two-wheel bike, with one wheel gone (the garment industry) and the other (tourism) severely damaged. What he overlooked, as did I in reporting on his analogy, was the third wheel - government - which is so much larger than the other two that it unbalances the whole vehicle, and is also badly warped, further destabilizing the bicycle. In any case, a three-wheeled vehicle is really a tricycle, meant primarily for children. Would that mean that the CNMI economy hasn't gotten very far in its path toward maturity?

To continue the analogy for a moment, what would seem to be needed is one of those old-fashioned bicycles that have one large wheel and one small one - with the smaller being government, and the larger, tourism. However, those bikes never became very popular - possibly because they were so difficult to ride?

A new type of vehicle, perhaps? With one large wheel (tourism) and two smaller ones (government and a secondary, supplementary industry)?

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However far one carries the analogy - and maybe one really shouldn't try - there's no escaping the fact that the basic, indispensable "wheel" to the economy is tourism. Yet the CNMI continues to give it short shrift (defined in the "American Heritage College Dictionary," 4<sup>th</sup> edition, as "scant attention"). In the last week, to take just one example, the local papers have reported on the robbery of several tourists. Nor is that new or unusual. It happens all the time. Yet it has occurred to no one, apparently, that each of these incidents not only hurts the tourist - financially if not physically- but also financially hurts the CNMI. The negative publicity created by the stories these tourists tell their friends and neighbors about being robbed - about how they'll never visit the CNMI again - is something the CNMI cannot erase, no matter how many ads appear on overseas television about its sea, sun and sand.

Yet has the legislature done anything to support the Department of Public Safety so that it can put more officers out on patrol? So it has more vehicles? So that it can staff the kobans? So it can better train its officers in the ways of protecting tourists? If the CNMI is serious about tourism, shouldn't funding to assure the safety of its tourists be given top priority?

And what happens to those tourists? Is assistance given to replace lost documents? Perhaps some money, to replace what they lost? Token, at least, gifts to make sure they leave with a good impression of the CNMI despite their loss? Is it time to form an ad hoc committee/task force to address tourism safety? Doesn't our economy depend on it?

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An astute long-time resident observed recently that allowing the garment industry into the CNMI was probably a mistake, since it diverted attention - and funding - from building and improving the CNMI's tourism industry. If focus had been on tourism, theoretically, at least, wetlands and ponding basins would not be only on the drawing boards, they would be in place, protecting the quality of the lagoon waters. Marine reserves would have been in place to protect the

coral reef and marine habitat, important to both the snorkelling and scuba industry. Sewage outfalls would have been built at a proper distance from shore, and kept in good order, for the same reason.

Codes would have been in place long since to control the construction and appearance of buildings along major roads and highways. Sidewalks would be in place. It would not have taken such a long time to begin to try develop attractive tourist areas. There'd be a performing arts/cultural center, showing all day into late evening, and while there might be an amusement park there wouldn't be poker parlors, or call girls so in evidence on the streets.

Tourists will come - if the destination is safe, if the waters are pristine, if there are interesting things to do and see, if the surroundings are attractive, if the culture is accessible, if prices are reasonable..... That the CNMI does not have safe drinking water, that the power occasionally fluctuates are not necessarily overwhelming distractions. Tourists have been known to brave discomfort, more primitive conditions. But only if there are enough other attractions to make those discomforts worthwhile.

The CNMI, however, has not seen fit to spend its money in those areas. Maybe what the CNMI should do now is, finally, concentrate on developing itself as a desirable tourist destination, and forget about trying to find a second - or third - wheel, as the case may be, for its bicycle.

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Did anyone notice the short item in the *Marianas Variety* earlier this week that Shanghai taxis will be given "spit sacks" in hopes of curbing the habit of drivers and their passengers of spitting in public? Says the article, quoting the *China Daily*, "The 'no-spitting' regulation came after Shanghai decided to make people give up the ugly and unhygienic habit and present a healthy city for the 2010 World Expo." Organizers of the 2008 Beijing Olympics also want Shanghai to teach its people to stand in line, stop littering and generally be better mannered. That, too, should say something to the CNMI about tourist impressions....

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It's being said in some corners that the CNMI waited too long to make its presence felt in the U.S. Congress - why weren't delegations - or at least our leaders - there to represent the interests of the CNMI in the minimum wage bill from the beginning? (The elephant in the room here being the CNMI governor's relationship with Jack Abramoff.....)

However, it turns out that fate is, temporarily, at least, being good to the CNMI. First was House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's capitulation to pressure and having to include American Samoa in the minimum wage bill, after opponents pointed out the apparent conflict of interest between tuna company headquarters in her state of California and the tuna companies' factories in American Samoa. And now it's the Senate's concern with the effect of the minimum wage on small businesses that has derailed the House version of the minimum wage bill from its promised fast track.

The addition of American Samoa to the minimum wage bill has called attention to its wage review board, and it now looks as though Congress just might decide to treat the CNMI similarly. It has also brought to the forefront again the inequity of the CNMI's lack of

non-voting delegate.

Quite possibly, had CNMI representatives come to Washington, D.C. earlier, and arrived at agreement with U.S. House members on an acceptable minimum wage for the CNMI, neither of those possibilities would now exist.

Businesses should not close yet. There may still be hope.....

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Short takes:

Kudos to Tina Sablan for the courage, the creativity, the drive, the determination not only to issue a "Manifesto" but also to carry through on her own suggestion that people speak up at public forums, by actually providing the means for people to do so, convening the first of what promises to be a series of public forums at which people may air their concerns, offer their solutions.

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Not only did I miss the misspelling of "bulletin" in last week's column, but I also made the mistake of referring to Kodep Uludong by his father's name, Cisco. My apologies! I've reached that ripe old age where it is the children of people I knew who are the major actors in today's world. And where I'm not always so swift in coming up with the right names. A thousand pardons.

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A lesser error, not totally of my own doing, is referring to Kodep's group as "anti-federalization." It is, he informed me this past week, opposed to unilateral action on the part of the U.S. Congress without consideration and consultation with the people of the CNMI, particularly given the provision in Section 902 of the Covenant for consultation. Such consultation has not occurred, he maintains, either in setting the proposed CNMI minimum wage nor, to date, in the discussions about control of immigration. He hopes to get that message across to the Congress via tonight's rally at American Memorial Park organized by his group, "Our Commonwealth."

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According to a report in the *Saipan Tribune*, the Emergency Management Office director informed the media that EMO is the only agency designated to issue and clear emergency tsunami warnings and the like. Actually, I would argue that for tsunamis, at least, it is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that has that authority. I do not mean to undermine the authority and responsibility of the EMO, but if, as has happened, it lags ½ hour or more behind NOAA's findings - which are available on the web - does not the public have the right to the earlier information? For the EMO to insist that the media report only those notices issued by EMO, it will have to do a better job of getting its information out in a more timely manner.

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Board of Education member Herman T. Guerrero said there was a need for new faces on the Board. There is a need for new faces - and new viewpoints - elsewhere as well, not only in the legislature but throughout government. Take the senator who objected to the Philippine Consulate's recent decision that domestic helpers in the CNMI are to receive a minimum of \$400

per month instead of the present \$300. The senator accused the Consul of interfering in the affairs of the CNMI. I'm sorry, sir, but the "product" comes from the Republic of the Philippines, and it seems to me that the RP has every right to price - and protect - its product as it wishes. The CNMI can always choose not to buy that "product"- if it so wishes.

The issue of "new faces" and new viewpoints is particularly timely at the moment, since the local parties are already working on putting together their slates for this November's mid-term election.

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Movies this week: only one new one, a bottom-of-the-barrel PG-13. Totals, 2 PG's, 3 PG-13's, 2 R's, and the non-rated, entertaining New Zealand import "Samoa Wedding"- maybe a PG-13?