

On My mind
2/09/07

I don't normally favor Republicans (especially on the federal level), much less the minions of either party sent out from Washington to deal with this anomaly called the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Some have been less objectionable than others, but to the best of my memory, none has achieved a better understanding of the unique nature of the CNMI, and none has done a better job of representing that uniqueness to the U.S. Congress than David B. Cohen, the current "minion" assigned by the Department of Interior as interface between "us" and "them." (No disrespect intended.)

Cohen, in his prepared statement for delivery before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources regarding labor, immigration, law enforcement and economic conditions in the CNMI, which was released to local media shortly before its scheduled delivery at hearings in Washington, D.C., does not hesitate to spell out the CNMI's problems and short-comings in the areas under discussion. But Cohen goes much further. He counters the failings with factual explanations, openly addresses the concerns of both the Congress and the CNMI, and provides pathways to solution that are reasonable, equitable, manageable.

He spells out, more clearly and concisely than I've seen elsewhere, the steps the CNMI has taken, in conjunction with concerned federal agencies, to address the issue of foreign labor, effectively disabusing the misconceptions held by both members of Congress and the national media. Yet he admits that concerns still exist. "The CNMI remains a two-tier economy where the private sector is overly reliant on foreign employees, and where the indigenous population is overly reliant on the public sector for employment," he notes.

"The sheer scope and scale of the foreign labor situation in the CNMI make the CNMI a special case....The question, Mr. Chairman, is not whether the CNMI's current economic structure is a good one. It is not. The question is how to help the people of the CNMI build a strong, prosperous and just society without causing needless pain and suffering to innocent people—including the foreign employees—in the transition."

Cautions Cohen: "Since federalization would constitute a paradigm shift from the current system, we believe that various options for federalization should be considered carefully in order to avoid unintended consequences." He then offers five principles as a guide to discussion:

"First, we must ensure that national security and homeland security issues are properly addressed....The second principle is that, subject to the need to address compelling national security and homeland security concerns, we should minimize damage to the CNMI economy and maximize the potential for future economic growth....The third principle is that we must ensure that the new CNMI economy is not as conducive to worker exploitation and abuse as was the old CNMI economy....The fourth principle is that we should carefully analyze the likely impact of major proposals before we implement them....The fifth and final principle is that we must ensure that the people of the CNMI participate fully in decisions that will affect their future."

He concludes, "Before considering legislation that would drastically change the lives of the people of the CNMI, we hope that Congress will consider granting them a seat at the table at which their fate will be decided."

The CNMI is fortunate to have such an articulate, astute, empathetic, presence at the hearings.

While the results won't immediately improve the economy, reports are coming in that tourists and visitors alike have noticed the results of Beautify CNMI's litter clean-up efforts. According to the coconut wireless, they've told various local residents that the difference from years past is definitely noticeable, that the cleanliness of the island is impressive. Little by little, step by step....

Another tourist enhancement being aired is the concept of a 16-mile hiking trail along the "crest" of Saipan's mountain range that would run from the Japanese Command Post in the north all the way to Lake Susupe in the south. As envisioned, the trail would provide viewpoints over both sides of the island, and would eventually connect as well, with all the lesser trails already in existence.

The trail would provide an eco-tourism-based activity for tourists, particularly if trained guides were used who were knowledgeable about the geology of the island, as well as the plants, birds and animals encountered on the trail. It would also create new jobs in the economy, and provide a means for protecting the environment. The concept is presently under discussion by Beautify CNMI's restoration committee as potential partners to the project are being identified.

Discussion of the trail gave rise to the idea of the establishment of a Commonwealth Park System, that would provide a single focus for the management and preservation of "state" parks in the CNMI. Representative Cinta Kaipat said it would take research to identify the features such a designation would involve, but that she would be willing to look into it.

The Commonwealth Utilities Corporation has finally put out a new Request for Proposal for - this time - "the privatization of the CNMI's power business." At least it calls for privatization, not lease, and would appear to cover all aspects of providing power, including generation, transmission and distribution, as well as billing, collection and customer service.

But other aspects of the RFP are not so felicitous. Prospective bidders are expected to pay a non-refundable fee of \$1,000 simply to obtain a copy of what are being called "Pre-Qualification Requirements," and, even worse, a non-refundable "pre-qualification fee" of \$25,000 as "a condition of the CUC's acceptance of the Pre-Qualification Proposal." I'm sorry, but that makes no sense to me whatsoever! Why should anyone pay \$25,000 just for the "privilege" of submitting a bid? It's costly enough just to prepare the bid!

Moreover, the bids will be scored on a scale which awards only 10% of the score for business experience, and only 23% for financial capability. Technical ability will be worth 57% and another 10% is set aside for "other objectives." Is technical ability the same as technical feasibility? Shouldn't business experience and financial capability be nearly equal in importance?

This RFP has been a long time coming, but at first glance, it sure doesn't seem very viable. Why is a "pre-qualification" process necessary at all? Haven't enough proposals been submitted over the years to make this unnecessary, redundant? Won't this just delay even further any real improvement in the power system?

Short takes:

Have you voted yet against the Saipan-da as CNMI mascot in the *Saipan Tribune's* "Opinion Meter"? "Colonel" Alex Sablan's letter to the editor in today's *Marianas Variety* raises the interesting question of whether the Saipan-da is a DFS project through the Marianas Visitors Authority, or whether it's another MVA project through DFS.

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Probably the most outrageous comment of the week, if not the month - or even the year - is Retirement Fund Administrator Mark Aguon's comment, quoted in yesterday's *Trib* that "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" in referring to the provisions of Senate Bill 15-76 that offer reforms to the present flawed retirement system. If he doesn't think the system has problems, the CNMI is really in trouble! The bill, carefully researched by Senator Fricka Pangelinan and appearing to deal with all of the major problems in the present system, deserves thoughtful consideration, rather than such ignorant dismissal. (The problem I have with austerity Fridays is that I cannot call people for direct confirmation of information provided elsewhere.....)

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Also outrageous is the coconut wireless report that the Department of Lands and Natural Resources intends to spend \$15,000 to bring an "arborist" from California to conduct tree-trimming training on island in the face of the enthusiastically-received and highly rated just-completed workshop on tree care and trimming using Guam talent and coordinated by Beautify CNMI! and Marianas Resource Conservation & Development Council that cost only \$1,500.

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While some called publication of the list of alleged illegal aliens outrageous, insiders say that the point was to disprove the belief that thousands of illegal aliens reside in the CNMI. That the list wasn't even in alphabetical order was pretty outrageous, but it was an in-house error, I was told, which doesn't excuse it, but....and while it doesn't really compensate those listed erroneously, it also apparently served to identify shortcomings in the system....I guess all one can say is at least someone's trying.....

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I was shocked to read, earlier this week, that Kevin Latham is the "outgoing" director of the now-flourishing JoeTen-Kiyu library. It is, of course, typical of Latham, who maintained a very low profile throughout his phenomenally successful tenure, to leave so quietly. It was through his efforts that the Library won the \$930,000 grant that funded the Children of our Homeland Center, a \$375,000 grant for automation and computer services, and another \$66,000 in grants for related library services, that its circulation soared, that its collections grew. Another example of highly qualified professionals being displaced/replaced as a result of short-sighted efforts to reduce costs.....

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For those who may not be aware, the CNMI lost another major resource last week, when popular and highly respected SCUBA dive master and fisherman Ben (Vicente M.) Concepcion passed away unexpectedly. Funeral services are scheduled for Mt. Carmel Cathedral on Wednesday, February 14th at 3:00 p.m. Condolences may be sent to the family at P.O. Box 31CHRB, Saipan, MP 96950.

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Movies this week: Three new, and 2 PG-13's ("DreamGirls" being well-rated); of the five remaining PG-13's, "Freedom Writers" is the only one well-rated, though "Because I Said So"

and "Epic Movie" are among the top five money-makers.