

On My Mind
3/02/07

First, the corrections. I'm told by Dr. Tom Arkle, Special Consultant to the Mayor of Tinian for resource development, that contrary to last week's column, Bridge Capital, recently established on Saipan, has nothing to do with Tinian. The Tinian company is Bridge Investment Group, and while also interested in gambling - it holds a license for a casino on Tinian - it is different. In fact Bridge Investment Group has on its board several members of the U.S. President's Advisory Commission of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. My apologies.

Another correction: I was informed by Mark S. Pangelinan, Emergency Management Office Deputy Director (and not PIO, as I had earlier indicated) that the Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Geological Survey and the CNMI did get signed after all. As far as the federal 2008 budget is concerned - last week's column bemoaned the fact that no funds had been provided the USGS towards volcano monitoring projects in the CNMI - Pangelinan said that both the CNMI governor and the Washington Rep are continuing to consult with congressional staffers of Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska to see what can be done to resolve the issue. Thank-you, Mark, for all the good information!

The National Governor's Association has been meeting in Washington, D.C. over the last few days. As did the Interagency Group on Insular Areas. As did the House Resource Committee's Subcommittee on Insular Affairs. But the CNMI was not present. It's not clear whether this was due to the governor's continuing health problems or to his newly announced travel embargo. Either way, it would appear to be a case of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face, as the saying goes.

The CNMI complains that it is not given an opportunity to speak up when issues affecting it are discussed. Yet when such an opportunity does come up, the CNMI does not take advantage of it. This makes no sense. Among other things, the NGA has, in the past, endorsed a resolution supporting the CNMI position that it be given a seat as non-voting delegate in the U.S. Congress. The IGIA is bound to discuss items directly affecting the CNMI, as did the Insular Affairs Subcommittee. But without the CNMI there to voice its concerns, not only does the CNMI lose out, but its absence weakens others' positions as well.

Yes, much can be done via phone, fax, e-mail, or tele- or video-conferencing, but nothing is quite as effective as face-to-face contact, especially in group settings.

Nor is this true only for the NGA, or the IGIA. It is unfortunate that the CNMI is so far removed from the seats of federal government, and while it's true that the government is fighting a financial crisis, it's nonetheless not at all clear that another of the governor's un-researched "shoot-from-the-hip" edicts - this time banning all travel in the executive branch - is the solution. The announcement of the ban, earlier this week, was not accompanied by any figures as to the savings that might be effected, nor by any indication as to what alternatives might have been considered. Moreover, categorical rules, such as the ban on travel, rarely work as intended.

Some travel is more necessary than others. Surely guidelines could be established, and

procedures initiated to make sure that the guidelines are fairly applied and that only travel that truly benefits CNMI interests (in the long- or the short-term) is taken? Or is that beyond the capabilities of the administration?

Election year might make it more difficult, but the conclusion seems inescapable, unavoidable, inevitable: if the intent is to cut costs, the only real solution is to cut the size of government. And not merely by not filling vacancies since some vacancies are more damaging than others. One can hide from the truth only so long without appearing totally ignorant, ineffective.

In the meantime, the governor's travel to California this week-end for a medical check-up couldn't have been better timed.

I'd like to suggest an amendment to Representative Manny Tenorio's bill to cancel austerity Fridays and substitute a number of payless (heretofore paid) holidays instead. As it stands, the bill would also reduce rebates by 20%, and while I see nothing wrong with that - the CNMI pays fewer taxes than almost any state (no school tax, no property tax, no sales tax, no road tax) - others feel the higher cost of living due to the island location should offsets such taxes. I'm not sure where those people think the money for all the services provided by government should come from if not from taxes paid by the beneficiaries of those services, but that's another story.

The amendment I'd like to suggest is to delete the rebate reduction, and instead, revive the desk audit that the administration promised months ago, and begin a program of reductions-in-force based on the findings of the audit. That way, rather than losing valuable functions, as does the no-filling-vacancies rule, the government would be able to rid itself of positions that don't perform useful, necessary functions.

Considering the political baggage that U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources senior staffer in charge of insular issues (isn't that a wonderful title?) Allen Stayman carried with him in coming to the CNMI this past week, it's a testament to his courage that he came at all. But come he did, accompanied by his counterpart in the Republican party who did not bear nearly as grandiose a title, staffer Josh Johnson to the Senate panel's ranking Republican Senator Pete Domenici, as well as Department of Interior congressional liaison Stephen Sander. And judging from all reports, Stayman managed to meet all the right people, say all the right things, and otherwise present himself as interested, empathetic, knowledgeable regarding CNMI concerns.

Much of what was discussed has already been covered in the press, but it's worth repeating a few things: He said the first thing he would do on returning to D.C. was talk with those working on the minimum wage bill to emphasize the devastating effect a too-hastily imposed increase would have on the CNMI. He pointed out that no other country in the world leaves a part of its borders under local, rather than national control - a concern heightened by 9/11. And he stressed the importance of working in partnership - the various components of the CNMI together with those in Washington - if an equitable and workable solution is to be forthcoming on the issues of minimum wage and immigration.

Those who would argue that the Covenant is being threatened or violated by the

federalization of immigration might want to re-read Section 502, which says, unequivocally, that immigration and naturalization laws of the U.S. will not apply to the CNMI, "except in the manner and to the extent made applicable to them by the Congress after termination of the Trusteeship Agreement...."

Short takes:

New 2007 phone books have been issued. Sorry, that's not quite true. It's being called the "Marianas Information Book" - because this year, its glossy pages include Guam's white, yellow and government pages, plus a separate listing of Guam Realtors. For a self-touted "information" book, the absence of the four-page survival guide, the four pages of earthquake, typhoon, and tsunami precautions, the tide charts, and the map of the airport - all of which were included in last year's more modest telephone directory - seem peculiar, to say the least.

Not to mention that now the book weighs even more, so that not only size-wise, but weight-wise, it becomes far more difficult to handle than previous years' smaller versions. The first thing I did when I got home was cut the book in half, and store the Guam part elsewhere. That makes its weight far less obnoxious, even though it admittedly doesn't help cut the over-all dimensions.

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Has anyone looked at how much money might be saved if those big empty tour busses were replaced by smaller vans? The fuel costs must be enormous. Insurance rates ditto. What does it say to the handful of tourists that rattle around in those great big empty behemoths? What does it do to our roads? To our air quality? Wouldn't it save money even if the companies bought a van for the daily tours, and only used the busses when fuller loads were expected at the airport? As an alternative, they could pick up other passengers as a form of public transport....

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Latest nonsense from the House of Representatives: a bill that would ban the use of a "Made in the USA" label on products made in the CNMI in part because the label "by mere definition denotes a physical location attribute that the CNMI does not want to infer because the CNMI is not physically located within the continental United States."

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Those who support more involvement of the military in the CNMI as a potential source of revenue might want to be careful what they wish for. The military is another kind of behemoth, not only large, but powerful and generally rigid and self-righteous; trying to negotiate with it to protect the CNMI's environment and natural resources (so important to tourism) is sure to be costly, prolonged and difficult, with no guarantee the outcome would benefit the CNMI.

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I've been told on good authority that the COLA just received by retirees is for the first two quarters of calendar 2007 - that is, through June of 2007. (None was received for 2006 - calendar or fiscal.) Strange as that is, surely it would not be considered any stranger to limit COLA payments to those receiving less than \$40,000 (or some similar number) in benefits? That way, maybe there'd be some left to pay the government share of employees who may be shorted in their pensions, as is being proposed by the Retirement Fund. COLA is not nearly as important to people receiving higher benefits, and it might make more sense to spread the wealth

a little....

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The government, in its efforts to collect moneys owed it has now proposed to institute a system of offset tax procedures to deduct monies owed it from rebates or overpayments due the debtor. The proposed regs, printed in the February 15 Commonwealth Register, allow for both voluntary and involuntary offset procedures. Those wishing to comment have until March 15 to do so.

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Movies this week: only one new one: "Wild Hogs," rated PG-13, for a total of 2 R's and 5 PG-13's, only one of which is among the top three in either earnings or ratings according to <
www.rottentomatoes.com>: "Ghost Rider," a PG-13.