

On My Mind
4/20/07

While it doesn't really help the CNMI, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the CNMI is not the only one suffering from a decline in tourist traffic. Seems the mainland is suffering as well. Reports indicate that tourism traffic to the U.S. is down 17%, mainly from "off-shore" travellers - that is, excluding Canada and Mexico.

Says a Republic of South Africa travel report, "Since September 11, the U.S. has seen a 17% decline in foreign visitors, and a travel advocacy group says that the reason is a climate of fear and frustration that is turning away foreign business and leisure travelers from visiting the United States and damaging America's image abroad."

Notes a blogger on <
<http://www.homelandstupidity.us/2006/11/29/entry-to-us-scares-away-tourism-business/> > a "study of international travelers shows that foreign visitors to the United States worry more about customs officials at ports of entry than terrorism...." "Foreign travelers are in agreement: the U.S. entry process is unpredictable and unfriendly to foreign visitors, it is hurting America's image abroad and deterring many from visiting the U.S.," said Thomas Riehle of RT Strategies, according to the same article.

A Dan Schlossberg writes, in his article "Decline in International Visitors Worries Travel Executives" on < ConsumerAffairs.Com >, "Although global travel is on the rise, international travel to the U.S. is headed in the opposite direction. That's bad news for airlines, hotels, restaurants, and others who depend upon foreign tourism.... The reasons seem obvious:

- Declining regard for the United States by potential foreign visitors
- Increasing security precautions following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks
- Complicated and confusing rules for obtaining U.S. visas
- Stiff competition for travel and tourism from other countries."

Conclusion: lack of seats on airplanes is not the only reason the CNMI is suffering a drop in tourists.

Moral of the story: The CNMI must maintain its vigilance to see that "federalization of immigration" does not allow Homeland Security to erect the same barriers here that have put off travelers to the mainland. See also Saipan Chamber of Commerce President Juan "Pan" T. Guerrero's complaints in a story in today's *Saipan Tribune*.

In a related vein, an article that declares that "the Northern Marianas people, not the United States government, have final authority over their internal affairs, and that any federal law impacting such affairs can therefore apply to them only to the extent of their continuing consent to such laws," has appeared in the *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal* - a web-based, law journal dedicated to issues facing Asia and the Pacific Rim. Titled "The right of self-government in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands," the article, written by local attorney Joseph E. Horey, states that "this conclusion flows inevitably from either of two lines of analysis - the construction of the Covenant itself, and the constitutional power of the United States to enter into the Covenant." I found it pretty heady stuff!

Many people, Horey wrote in an e-mail, "have been too quick to believe the feds when they claim the power to impose what laws they choose on us. We are selling ourselves short if we

seek only "consideration" and "consultation." These are nice, but they are not enough for free citizens of a self-governing commonwealth – only consent will suffice. If we deal with the US on the assumption that the current controversies are questions only of policy, and not also of power, then we are negotiating on false premises, to our own detriment."

The full text of the article is available at < www.hawaii.edu/aplpj/ >. Click on "Articles Archive," then go to Volume IV, Issue 2 (June 2003).

Budget woes continue, with threats of more unwieldy cuts and outlandish proposals - such as combining the Public School System and the Public Library, of all things - yet the elephant in the room continues to be ignored. The administration still doesn't get it. Eighty per cent (80%) or more of every agency's budget is devoted to personnel, but rather than apply 80% of the cuts to personnel, the administration is attempting to take 100% of the necessary cuts from the remaining 20% of the budget - which makes no sense whatsoever.

Whatever happened to the promised government-wide desk audit - which was supposed to identify over-lapping, redundant or unneeded positions? Even in the absence of that audit, it should be possible to reduce personnel throughout government - and not just by attrition or shutting down a single agency. Of course, the difficulty - given the absence of the audit - is making reduction fair and impartial, rather than political. Maybe a bipartisan committee could be appointed to made the determinations?

Yes, it will create hardships, but any cut is going to do that. And entrepreneurship can go a long way to counter unemployment. Dawdling, sitting on one's hands, throwing out wild ideas, is not the answer. Action is. But it must be reasoned, realistic, intelligent - or is that too much to ask?

On the subject of reason, realism, intelligence, it looks like I might have been premature in condemning nuclear energy as a source of power for the CNMI. Tinian's Dr. Arkle, who made a presentation on the subject to the legislature last week, can be very persuasive! He noted in an e-mail to me, for example, that a U.S. source is offering a "new Gen III+ plant that sits on a half acre of land, produces 27 megawatts of power and is fueled by a completely factory sealed (and portable) "pod." The pod is replaced every 5 years by the company and simply taken away (as a sealed unit). There is NO waste - no exposure - no storage. Even the "reaction" itself (in ALL gen III+ reactors) is exactly the opposite of previous reactions. It requires NO extensive shielding, NO external coolant, NO extensive containment...due to the inherent safety features and the IMPOSSIBILITY of meltdown or radiation releases. There are NO emissions of ANY kind - ever. NOTHING leaves the internal system - not even water or vapor. There are only 3 sources of power that have NO emissions - Solar, Wind AND Nuclear - GEN III+. (emphasis is Dr. Arkle's).

Comparing costs, he estimates that a 27 megawatt nuclear plant would cost about \$130 million, including maintenance, over a 20-year period, while an oil-burning plant would cost over \$400 million. Moreover, nuclear energy would have no emissions, compared to the fuel-burning plant. Construction would take 16 months, after all permits have been acquired. All Arkle is asking, at the moment, is "that "official" requests be made to the DOE to send experts to assess applicability in the CNMI and tell us the real bottom line story - good or bad."

Sounds good to me.

Earlier I'd mentioned that one can't rely on the newspapers for news. Now I am forced to add one can't rely on the web either! I'm not talking generalities here, but the cnmi.net web page, - more specifically its calendar, supposedly supported by the Marianas Visitors Authority - which lists two Flame Tree Festivals for this month, one on April 15-17, and the other April 26th through 29th. In addition, it shows some sort of holiday on the 18th - it is marked in bright red - but offers no information on why.

There's also a "contact us" address, which doesn't work. Great going, guys!

(For those who aren't aware, the annual Flame Tree Festival will be held from April 26th through 29th.)

More rumors from the coconut wireless: the reason those millions of dollars in CIP funds are sitting idle is because the Department of Public Works no longer has qualified engineers and architects to carry out its projects. Contracts weren't renewed, empty slots weren't filled, and now there's no one there that knows how to proceed on the many approved CIP projects gathering dust on the shelves, say the rumors.

Another rumor from the same source has it that the reason the Garapan Paseo, originally thought to become host to the Thursday night street market, has not done so is because of concern that the tent poles will mar the ground finish in the Paseo, and because there isn't sufficient wiring to accommodate the needs of the vendors. Yet another example of planning failure! Maybe Northern Marianas College - or even the high schools - should conduct classes in what planning is, and how to do it. Certainly, the lack of it would seem endemic.

Not unrelated is the difference of opinion between those who claim an ILS system is necessary for Tinian, and those who do not. Seems like what is needed here is for everyone involved - including foreign airlines and the FAA - to sit down at the same table, and work through their differences, rather than hurling accusations at one another through the media.

Short takes:

One can only hope, I guess, that Frank Taitano, recently appointed a desk officer at the Department of Interior's Office of Insular Affairs, will be able to curb his well-known and long-standing loyalty to former governor Juan N. Babauta, and deal in an impartial and even-handed manner with his former rivals. Wonder how much his Republican Party affiliation had to do with his appointment?

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Letters to the editor seem to get longer and longer. Among this week's, a Joe Camacho's supporting local preference for the CUC contract most calls for comment. The most important question is NOT whether a candidate has a track record in the CNMI, but its competency in power systems; nor should the over-riding concern be giving local companies preference. Power is the backbone of the island's infrastructure, and as such, the greatest concern should be making sure responsibility for its production, generation, distribution goes to the most capable of providing it, not to one's cousins, friends, relatives.

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New movies: None. Last week's 3 R's, 3 PG's, one PG-13 and one PG, are still there.