

On My Mind

5/4/07

Toying with people's expectations is always risky. If the expectations aren't met, it could affect one's credibility - depending, of course, on the expectation that was held out, the circumstances involved and the players. In the case of the governor's notice last week that his State of the Commonwealth speech would contain a big surprise, the fact that it did not - though surprisingly little made of in the press - did nothing to help his credibility.

And while he was at least honest enough to admit that times are not better, that was another expectation that had been held out to the people, and did not materialize in the manner in which it was promised, either.

There were additional "expectations" held out in the governor's speech - as well as in his presentation to the Saipan Chamber of Commerce this week - that trouble me - especially in the area of new investments. If the LaoLao Bay villas materialize - 100-120, and the 600 villas are built in Garapan, and 875 homesteads are opened up in Koblerville, that's an additional 1575 residences - all creating a burden on our already over-stressed infrastructure - particularly water and power, not to mention the sewer system. And while mention was made of moneys becoming available for some power improvements, the governor offered no time-table, nothing substantive about the extent to which the improvements would solve present problems, no word on progress towards improved water or sewer services, and not even a hint of a timetable for the privatization of the power plant itself.

Another expectation offered was that tightening enforcement of the 20 percent local hiring requirement in local businesses would translate into increased employment of local residents. It is, at best, a band-aid solution. The 20 percent requirement would more easily be met if there were enough qualified local applicants, and/or if the pay rate were sufficient to attract local workers. Without trained employees, without a livable wage scale, those job slots will remain empty - or at worst, be filled with people not qualified to operate in those capacities. The CNMI is already suffering from a lack of skilled workers in its work force. Making matters worse by forcing the hiring of more unskilled workers is a band-aid solution, and will not help.

What was not offered, to carry the analogy a little further, was the surgery that will be required to heal the patient - the cutting of the work force. True, a preliminary step was promised: the Office of Personnel Management has been asked to draw up a plan for carrying out a reduction in force. But with civil service personnel protected, and the first to be cut comprising excepted service and limited-term contract employees, the result will again be the letting go of the professionals who have education, training, experience, who know their jobs and can do them, and the retention of largely lesser-skilled staff, to the detriment of the entire government process.

Earlier, a desk audit had been promised, for the same purpose; that did not materialized (yet another unmet expectation....) Will reduction in force actually come to pass? Nor was any reconstructive surgery mentioned: the privatizing of more government services, an increase in minimum wage, the overhaul of educational programs to better prepare students for the local job market, re-vamping of the Marianas Visitors Authority, support for zoning and land use planning before more public land is lost to homesteaders or in under-valued land-exchanges. All we got were band-aids addressing the symptoms, not the cause.

The title of the governor's speech to Chamber members was, "CNMI Economy: Maximizing CNMI resources through government-business partnership to achieve long-term sustainable economic prosperity" - a very promising topic, but again, not fulfilled. In the first place, partnerships imply give-and-take, shared responsibilities and efforts, working together. But the governor did not offer the private sector anything in exchange for his plea that its members provide more training, more jobs, to local residents.

Maybe he was thinking of the private sector and the government as partnering in describing steps that both sectors should or would undertake in working on the same sick patient - the economy - but there was no sense of coordination, working together, as partners usually do.

He talked about finding ways to offer those 8,000 Marines and their accompanying family and support groups greater opportunities for training, education and recreation in the CNMI, but did not mention the many other services that could be offered in the private sector - from bottled water and uniforms from the garment factories to fresh produce from local farmers, fresh fish from the fishermen.

And of "long-term sustainable economic prosperity"? Not a word!

That there was no big surprise was sort of disappointing. That there was nothing new - nothing innovative, creative, definitive, concrete, or tangible - even more so.

Short takes:

Hopeful signs: the governor's support of using unpaid holidays rather than alternate austerity Fridays as a way of reducing costs. Proposed by House member Manny A. Tenorio several months ago, it would seem the idea has finally worked its way up to the administration, and found favor there as well. I'm not sure why its implementation has to wait til the end of the austerity Friday approach, but so be it. At least this way, everyone will be affected equally - no more jockeying for exceptions....political or otherwise.

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Another is the support voiced by Finance Secretary Eloy Inos for House Bill 15-243, which would increase the income tax on persons earning \$60,000 or more. (I'd give credit to the author, but was unable to identify him/her, this being an austerity holiday, and the information not having been provided by the newspaper.) Seems like a fair point at which to draw the line. If the Public School System won't cut its principals', its commissioner's salaries, at least this way, they too would be forced feel some of the pain. But of course, neither of these hopeful signs is reality - yet.

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The Beautify CNMI! Micronesia Challenge subcommittee is exploring the many pathways toward effective protection of turtles and turtle nesting sites on Saipan, including hooking up with conservation efforts in other parts of Micronesia, mounting education campaigns in the schools, more vigorous patrolling of vulnerable beach sites. To watch just one of the hatchlings find its way to the sea, go to < <http://hafa-adai.blogspot.com/> > for a spectacular photographic sequence.

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It's also encouraging to see that the Mayor's plans for a cultural center in Garapan's Sugar

King Park are moving forward with the official opening tentatively slated for May 12. Whoever it was that suggested the mayor's office should be abolished would seem to have been unaware of the many good things this mayor has brought to Saipan - from his outspoken support for early prostate screening to the scholarships and many intercultural events he and his office have sponsored and supported, of which this is but the latest.

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Not so promising is the latest push by the legislature to try re-institute J.G. Sablan *et al's* Pagan mining rights - most recently by asking the administration to withdraw its suit, filed against the company in Superior Court. Couldn't the legislature at least wait for the report from the mining expert the government hired to assess the quantity and quality of the pozzolan on Pagan - a report which is, according to one highly-placed government official, due momentarily?

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Nor is the inaction on removing that crashed black pick-up from the trunk of the flame tree out along the Marpi road. Seems the first step must be taken by the Department of Public Safety - to declare, if it can't locate any indication of ownership, that the wreck is to be disposed of, and so notify the Mayor. The private company which has been removing "abandoned" cars deals only with cars for which it can still get a signed release, to protect itself from being charged with theft.

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Something to think about: With an "ex-pat" community that is as large as the one on Saipan, might it not be worthwhile to put together something along the lines of an international business/trade group/forum? Not to detract from the Chamber of Commerce - which is doing a great job putting together a number of timely workshops for its members and the community - but is, after all, focussed on local, rather than international issues and concerns. Literally speaking, the "ex-pats" [definition: taking up residence in a foreign country] on island are not only people from the U.S. mainland who have taken up residence in the CNMI, but also people from Japan, China, Korea, the Republic of the Philippines.....

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A "heads up:" In order to protest the high gas prices for automobiles, a national campaign is being launched to boycott all gas pumps on Tuesday, May 15. So, plan ahead - so you won't need to gas up on the 15th. If everyone boycotts the gas stations, it might alert the gas companies to the extent of people's frustrations with their high prices. Hey, it's worth a try!

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New movies: Three: "Spider-man 3," showing in two theaters (!), "Disturbia," horror-thriller, and "Lucky You," drama - all rated PG-13. The first two are among the week's box office hits, the last one got the poorest rating of five 'new opening' listings. The hold-overs: two R's, one PG 13, one PG.