

On My Mind

5/11/07

Correction: Last week in this space people were urged to join a national campaign and boycott gas stations on May 15 as a way of protesting the high price of gas. Well, seems it's not a new idea, and doesn't really have an impact. According to the web's < <http://www.snopes.com/politics/gasoline/nogas.asp> > the campaign does not result in people using LESS gasoline, but only in changing WHEN they buy it. The dealers get to sell the same amount of gas whether a one-day boycott is held or not.

The only way to have an impact, suggests snopes.com, is not to drive to work, but to use other means of transportation, or car-pool - to do something that reduces the amount of gas consumed. The article notes that the boycott idea has been around since 1999, and has been such a failure that new campaigns to boycott gas stations don't even receive press coverage anymore.

I use the < [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) > site regularly, to check out off-the-wall stories, those pleas for doing something en masse to help some poor soul or other, but have to admit it did not occur to me to use it in this case. Thanks to a more astute reader who called it to my attention!

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There may not be many tourists in the area, but one of the ugliest places I know - in terms of litter - is the grassy area on the "mauka" or mountain side of the Commonwealth Health Center - that piece that separates the building from the parking lot. The number of cigarette butts on the grass is appalling, and disgusting. The kindest thing to do would be to provide several ash trays of some sort or another out there - so people would have a place to put the butts. One wonders, though, how many smokers would use them.

The more difficult thing to do - though better for all concerned - would be to prohibit smoking in that area. After all, people should not be smoking, period - and it seems so contradictory to see clear evidence of poor health habits just outside the door of an institution dedicated to good health.

Admittedly that would require an enforcement officer with authority to issue tickets for littering. And would only serve to have the smokers move to more remote areas of the parking lot. But one has to begin somewhere.....

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Capital Improvement Project funds have been in the news lately - mostly negatively, since it appears the CNMI has substantial CIP money available that it is not spending, and that which, if spent, would allegedly provide a much-needed boost to the present poor economy. On the other hand, that which is being spent, as presumably it is on the extension of the Beach Road pathway, doesn't seem all that wisely spent. In Puerto Rico, there already is a paved path extending as far as the entrance to the old dump. Now a new path is being built along Middle Road, duplicating the path that already exists and forcing all those who would use the new path into direct contact with fumes from the heavy traffic along Middle Road as well as the risk of getting hit by passing cars - which travel at a much higher rate of speed here than elsewhere along the pathway. The new path would also force pathway users to cross the back road - twice.

One can only guess what was in the minds of those who designed the new path, but it would appear that the plans were drawn up before the dump closed, with the intention of routing the path's users away from the dump - no longer necessary, since walking past the now-closed dump is not as unpleasant as before. If that indeed was the thinking, it reveals a serious flaw in the CIP process which badly needs correction: those CIP projects left on the shelf for years before implementation should be subject to re-evaluation before being acted upon. Circumstances change. Plans should be modified accordingly. Or more money will be wasted, misspent.

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On the subject of federal funding, it would appear that the U.S. Department of Interior has awarded the CNMI some \$36,647,000 in funding in calendar year 2007 alone, allocated among four areas: CIP, Operation and Management Improvement Programs (OMIP), Compact Impact Aid, and Technical Assistance. It is interesting to note, here, that American Samoa, a much smaller entity, was given \$5 million more in CIP funds over the same period than the CNMI. Could this be because DoI knows the CNMI hasn't spent all the CIP funds it has?

Some other comparisons, based on a look at figures provided at < <http://www.doi.gov/oia/Firstpginfo/grants.html> >: Of ten agencies that provided federal funding to U.S. entities in 2006, five awarded more to American Samoa than to the CNMI: The Departments of Education and Health and Human Services each awarded \$10 million more, the Department of Energy \$1 million more, Agriculture \$6 million more, and the DoI's Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance awarded American Samoa \$15 million more than it awarded the CNMI. The total numbers: the CNMI received \$93 million from these ten agencies; American Samoa received \$118.25 million. The report also includes funding awarded to Guam, Republic of the Marshalls, Republic of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia.

Having looked only at the figures, but not the text, it would appear that the CNMI might be missing out on some funding opportunities.....

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Second place winner at Eric Plinske and Rik Villegas' Business Concepts competition for Northern Marianas College students earlier this week (see stories in today's issue of both papers) was a proposed grant-writing and management service. Judging from the DoI figures, cited above, the services of Grant Specialties LLC, as the team called itself, are much needed in the CNMI. Except for the creativity displayed by the Adrenalin Rush team - which deserved its own prize - I would have given the grant group first prize - at least in terms of contributing to the welfare of the CNMI. And, I'm afraid, I would have given the actual winner - Jam'n Games - honorable mention instead of first prize because playing arcade-type games does not promote family togetherness as the group claimed, but only fosters more self-absorbency. I hasten to add I am not questioning the decision of the judges - I don't know what criteria they were using.

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This year's Flame Tree festival presented a very clear example of what happens when one

has to do with less. The venue changed and there were far fewer booths. I missed the Palau reef-fish cooking tent, the rest of the Palau contingent (only a very small one, with limited items for sale, was present), the competitive Marshall Islands contingent, the promised Rankin re-prints, the greater variety of food stalls and last but not least, the various local artists who chose not to display this year - in objection, I was told, to yet another increase in the booth rental rate, the decision not to supply them with boards on which to hang their art.

But the festival did take place, there was variety in what was offered, the venue seemed fine, parking no more difficult than in previous years and the performances - at least those I saw - professional, enjoyable. Perhaps the most significant - and positive - change was that this year there were tents over the viewing areas and tiered seating - a vast improvement over previous years when much of the seating was on the grass, out in the open sun.

The program document was much shrunken, but that's ok. Most useful, at least to me, is a map of the booth layout, who is in what booth, and who is scheduled to perform when. That information was available as a xeroxed insert - and, no doubt, at considerable less cost than previous years' glossy editions.

I did find dismaying the number of booths given over to sales of items other than local/island/Pacific arts and handicrafts. Information booths about non-profit activities are ok - but not sales booths, and the like. After all, the Flame Tree festival is supposed to be an ARTS festival, and the sale of commercially available products doesn't fit that definition. Better to be more accommodating to the artists from on and off-island!

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Short takes:

Governor Fitial has told the CNMI that he has a job to do, and that's why he is cutting budgets so severely. Well, yes. He does have a job to do, but the challenge is to do it right. Declaring a moratorium on the hiring of excepted service personnel - even to fill a vacancy - would seem short-sighted, to put it mildly. Aren't most professionals on excepted status - from teachers, nurses and doctors to attorneys? Is this the category of employee the CNMI can dispense with most readily? Will he ever learn to aim properly - and get rid of the surplus, the non-functioning?

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Has anyone in Washington, D.C. - or here, for that matter - thought about what will happen to the CNMI's economy if those guest workers here more than five years are grandfathered under the terms of U.S. Congress' proposed immigration act, and given FAS-like status? Any number of the CNMI's foreign workers have worked for the same employer for many years, and have achieved positions of trust and responsibility. However, once offered a visa entitling them to travel to and work in the U.S. mainland, many will, no doubt, opt to leave the CNMI. This could create major problems for businesses that have come to depend on the foreign workers to keep their businesses running. Where will they get replacements? Granted, there is, in theory, a vast pool of unemployed in the CNMI - but members of that pool don't begin to have the required training and expertise. As is said, "beware of unintended consequences."

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It was confirmed again in a survey of tourists taken by a one of Sam McPhetres' social issues classes at NMC: what tourists expect - and find lacking - on Saipan are high quality fashion shops, more golf courses, and more restaurants, among other things. What in the world

leads them to expect that the CNMI offers such things in the first place? Could it be that the publicity, the sales pitches, that the Marianas Visitors Authority is spending so much money on is at fault? That the MVA is selling the wrong image to all those potential tourists out there? Yes, the CNMI is part of the United States, but a shopping or an urban eateries mecca it is not - never was, and never should be. Rather, what it offers - what the MVA should be selling - is the peace, calm and quiet, the (relatively) unspoiled natural beauty of small islands' tropical settings and their unique culture.

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New Films: two thrillers: "Next," rated PG-13, and "Vacancy," rated R, for a total of 5 PG-13s, one R, and one PG.