

On My Mind

6/22/07

One of Saipan's most valuable assets has been on glorious display these past few weeks, yet other than a "Flame Tree Arts Festival" held long before the trees bloom, nobody - neither the Marianas Visitors Authority nor anyone else - seems to be making any effort to capitalize on that asset - the gorgeously blossoming flame trees. This year, they seem more spectacular than usual - more trees in bloom, the blossoms thicker and more red, and the trees all blooming at the same time. And as the blossoms begin to fall, they just add to the color - a truly splendiferous sight.

But is the CNMI doing anything about it? Does it advertise flame tree blossom season, as do the Japanese with their cherry blossom festivals, and Washington, D.C., with its cherry blossom celebrations? Are there t-shirts, mugs, posters, photographs, artistic renderings, informative brochures available, for sale? Are there special tour packages offering island-wide flame-tree viewing tours? Tours offering views from the lagoon, from the air? short classes in how to take effective pictures? Are there contests for best poem, essay, best artwork, best photo? Is there ANY kind of celebration that the CNMI's lovely flame trees are once again in bloom?

In areas where cherry blossom season IS celebrated, people are encouraged to picnic under the trees, to walk along the roads where the trees are in bloom, to throw parties where trees are in view. There is no sign that the CNMI does anything of this sort either.

The CNMI does not have many assets. Flame trees, though not native to the CNMI, should certainly be considered one of its more outstanding ones. As such, one would think there'd be a concerted effort to take maximum advantage of their attractiveness and appeal - in other words, to capitalize on an asset the CNMI does have. Yet no one seems to be doing so.

Granted, there are times when it rains - or storms - during the time the trees are in bloom, and much of the grandeur gets blown away. But what if someone had filmed the routes of several flame-tree viewing tours during these past two weeks, or in prior years, and that those were then made readily available during those Flame Tree seasons when the trees did not maintain their blossoms? (Yes, phone and power lines get in the way of "pure" pictures, but the mass of color in vista views easily holds its own.) Then tourists could still see the splendor of the trees, even if only on film, or CD.

The Flame Tree Arts Festival was supposed to do at least some of the things noted above, but when it was shifted to an earlier time to accommodate the school schedule, it lost its original purpose. It isn't a flame tree festival any more, and quite frankly, its name should be changed accordingly, so that no one is led to believe that the CNMI does indeed observe a festival for the flame tree in bloom.

Under P.L.11-15, the very first of fourteen duties spelled out for the Marianas Visitors Authority is "Organizing and conducting programs, advertising, and publicizing the Northern Mariana Islands and its attractions to the traveling public." Maybe MVA needs to broaden its interpretation of "program"?

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Everyone's talking about using alternative energy as a means of bringing down the cost of electricity/power. Most of the talk focuses on government initiatives and island-wide systems. But for large configurations, proven alternate energy systems are not cheap, nor are most of them

yet quite "off-the-shelf" items. Large installations exist - some of them as demonstrations, experiments, a few as standard operations - but in general, alternatives like bio-fuel and ocean thermal have yet to prove their viability.

On the other hand, smaller individual applications are far more common, and tend to be closer to "off the shelf"-type installations. Perhaps what people should be looking at is either getting off the grid entirely - finding ways of providing their own power - or substituting some other source of power for some of their needs - such as a small windmill, or solar heaters, or bio-gas generators. That would relieve consumers of having to pay the enormous bills they now face, as well as decrease the load on the main power plant. Several people on island are already doing so.

It bears repeating, though, that the simplest, least expensive, and most effective way of all to save on power bills is to install conservation measures - from fluorescent lighting and reflective roof paintings to tint on windows facing the sun - and to reduce the use of air-conditioning (lower the temperature, use fans, turn it off in empty rooms), lower the hot water heater setting and unplug all the appliances and audio-visual systems that run clocks even when not in use. Individuals can make a difference!

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The CNMI's *Commonwealth Register*, which publishes all proposed regulations and proposed amendments to existing regulations for public comment, and notices of final adoption as well as a variety of other administrative matters, appears to be back on a regular schedule, almost. The *Register* is supposed to come out on the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month. For a time, it had not been appearing until much later, and this month did not appear on the 15<sup>th</sup> but the 18<sup>th</sup>. But on the whole, it does seem back on schedule.

Unfortunately, while it is possible to access the rather non-descriptive table of contents of each issue - through a multi-step process beginning at < [www.cnmilaw.org](http://www.cnmilaw.org) > - it is not possible to access the actual text involved.

This month's issue has a number of meaty items, including emergency regulations setting a moratorium on the hiring of more garment factory workers; proposed regulations to restrict the filing of labor complaints to a single person and single complaint per filing (at \$20 each); proposed regulations setting a minimum flat rate for water used by farmers in the Kagman watershed district; proposed regulations for transferring from the Retirement Fund's defined benefit plan to its defined contribution plan; proposed rules covering the stay of immediate relatives in the CNMI; and a somewhat strange notice by the CUC Executive Director of adoption and certification as official, CUC's procurement code as it is now codified in the NMI Administrative Code - sort of an after-the-fact approval.

Copies may be consulted at the Attorney General's office on Capital Hill and the Law Revision Commission at the Guma Hustisia in Susupe.

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Short takes:

A reader with a long memory responded to my suggestion that what the CNMI needs is to put the governor and the legislature on hold and turn authority over to a court-appointed administrator, with the words, "Sounds like you are suggesting bringing back the Hi-Com...Have

to admit it, things did run a lot smoother then. The power stayed on, was cheap, you could drink the 24 hour water. No such a bad idea at all."

Well, no, I wasn't thinking of the Hi-Com as such, but I can see where it's a memory that might resonate. And, without all the "politics" that Father Hezel wrote about, a lot of people could lead far less stressful lives.

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For a creative and very appealing vision of what the CNMI could look like, I would refer readers to the letter written by Angelo Villagomez that appeared in Wednesday's *Saipan Tribune*. He writes: "Imagine a system of hiking trails connecting the different parts of the CNMI Park System. Imagine building our roads so that a tourist (and locals) could SAFELY ride a bike from PIC to Bird Island. Imagine if, instead of building new foreign-owned mega-hotels, we created a co-op of locally-owned bed-and-breakfasts where tourists could become immersed in the local culture, practice their English, learn a little Chamorro, and eat loads of chicken kelaguen. Imagine if we redesigned our villages so that each one had a distinct look and feel and where a school, church, and grocery store were within walking distance of every home."

Imagine, indeed! And there's nothing un-do-able there. Nothing that would take millions to bring about.

Villagomez also did a nice take on the marijuana question, describing the effects of an inevitable government takeover of production, marketing, etc.

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The U.S. military seemingly spared no expense in staffing its "public scoping meeting" this past Thursday with personable, knowledgeable, public-relations-savvy members of its various branches. It even provided food and beverages! The purpose of the session was to obtain local input as the military updates a 1999 plan for the use of the Marianas for military training operations, and testing and operational activities in light of newer technologies and changes in the world's political climate.

Among activities under consideration: upgrading and modernizing training, and ranges, in underwater mine warfare, anti-submarine warfare, new small arms and mortar ranges, and for a proposed "Littoral Combat Ship." The military is required to submit an environmental impact statement prior to taking action and is currently seeking input to that statement.

Comments may be submitted to [marianas.tap.eis@navy.mil](mailto:marianas.tap.eis@navy.mil). Deadline for submission is July 16, 2007.

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Two new movies this week: "Evan Almighty," PG, and "Knocked Up," R, for a record-breaking total of five PGs (of which by far the best, in my opinion, is "Surf's Up"), 2 PG-13s, and one R.