

On My Mind

7/13/07

Over the past few months or more, the world at large has been looking at its treasures as its inhabitants tried to decide which ones should replace the original Seven Wonders of the World. Only one of the original seven has survived the ravages of time - and fire and earthquake: the pyramids of Egypt. None of the others - two Greek statues, a Greek temple, a mausoleum, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a light house in Alexandria, Egypt - have survived.

The CNMI has its own wonder of the world: cave pictographs and petroglyphs dating back to some 4,000 years ago - even older than some of those Seven Wonders of the World. Pictographs are images painted on rock; petroglyphs are images cut into rock.

The images could be a significant draw for visitors from all over the world, since few similar traces of earlier civilizations exist, at least in the Pacific area. Moreover, properly packaged, so to speak, they could become a significant source of revenue as well. Yet, special and unique as these images are, nothing has been done to take advantage of this rarity in the CNMI. They have never been included in the attractions touted to tourists as a reason to come visit. Why? Perhaps in respect for the ancestors who created them, or in respect for the elders who died in the cave during World War II.

Another reason, perhaps, is a concern for their protection and preservation. Though not widely advertised outside the CNMI, the existence of the images is known to tour guides, to adventure cavers and boonie stompers, is identified on tourist maps. And as a result, the images have already been damaged by people touching the petroglyphs and pictographs, by people rubbing their hands over them, even by vandals.

Yet neither have any efforts have been made to protect these rare and unique traces of earlier civilizations on Saipan. Nor has there been much effort to educate people on the significance of the images, on the importance of preserving them. No fence has been erected around the images, to prevent people from touching them, and there are no restrictions for visiting the site.

But as one web site, < <http://mdc.mo.gov/conmag/2000/10/3.htm> > notes, "Cave gates are now built to be as environmentally friendly and as strong as possible, using designs specified by the American Cave Conservation Association and Bat Conservation International.... Caves are not renewable resources, and restoring caves after they have been damaged is not a good solution. The only recourse to vandalism and damaging overuse of caves is conservation through education and protection before damage is done."

There is every reason to believe something similar could be done to protect Saipan's cave images. The costs of erecting a gate could - and indeed should - be paid for by charging people admission to the cave - under strict conditions and supervision. The fees should cover the costs of the maintenance of the gate, and the pay of personnel to provide supervision for cave visitations as well. Not protecting such a rare find as these images is almost criminal.

The new wonders? China's Great Wall, India's Taj Mahal, Peru's Machu Picchu, the Roman Coliseum, Brazil's statue of Christ high in the Andes, Petra, Jordan, and Chichén Itzá, Mexico. Subject to a final validation process, their official status will be confirmed during a forthcoming "New 7 Wonders" Inauguration Tour. According to Wikipedia, the new wonders had to be man-made, completed before 2000, and in an "acceptable" state of preservation.

Much of what was said at the overflow Saipan Chamber of Commerce meeting earlier this week has been covered by the media; herewith a few additional observations. The main item on the agenda was House Bill 15-38, the so-called labor reform bill, though hardly anyone present at the meeting would have agreed that "reform," as in "making better," would result from enacting the bill in its present form.

Some of the provisions in its present incarnation - and any number of revisions have been tacked on to the original version - seem intended not so much to reform labor practices but to generate revenue for the government. For example, with the banning of consensual transfers, all changes must be processed through the Labor Department, incurring not only additional documentation requirements but, more significantly, another range of fees as well.

Chamber vice-president Alex Sablan, who made the presentation on the bill, again voiced his recommendation that the administration work with the Retirement Fund to undertake to provide universal health insurance in the CNMI. This, he said, would save the government money, as well as lowering costs for private sector employers and for individual employees in both the private and the public sector. As it is now, the Retirement Fund provides health insurance coverage to both present and former government employees, and private sector employers must provide health insurance coverage for the foreign workers they hire, leaving 4,000-5,000 people who must provide their own, which forces everyone to pay a higher premium than they would if they were all combined into a single larger pool.

A member of the audience said that while previously, the forces driving the economy were the tourism and garment industries, and thus they were the focus of attention of the administration, now that both have shrunk it is what remains of the private sector that is driving the economy, and therefore the administration should focus on the needs and concerns of the private sector - not the least of which is represented by the Saipan Chamber of Commerce. It has long been a complaint of the Chamber that the administration has consistently failed to take its views into account in determining policy.

Absalon Waki, one of four House members present at the meeting - Frica Pangelinan was the only Senate member in attendance - acknowledged that business budgets are not built to cope with six-month absences of their employees, as the bill presently requires. He opined that maybe some members of the House have never run a business, so could not understand the impact of that requirement.

The biggest applause of the day went to the principal of Calvary Christian Academy Scott Norman, who asked why the CNMI doesn't enforce the laws already on the books. If those were enforced, others echoed, it would resolve many of the problems HB 15-38 attempts to address.

Short takes:

Praying provides solace to the soul, and is known to provide solution to a wide range of ills and dilemmas of one sort or another. But when the head of a government asks its people to pray for relief from proposed Congressional acts - rather than addressing the problem the acts are intended to overcome - can it be called anything other than an act of sheer desperation?

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Vice Speaker Justo S. Quitugua pens a lot of bills, some of them better than others. One of the better ones, House Bill 15-20, has finally become Public Law 15-72. The law prohibits members of the legislature from disposing of the furniture and equipment in their offices once they leave office, requiring that they leave it behind for use by incoming members. While the law is commendable, it is absolutely shameful that it has required a law to force members to do what is only ethical, logical and sensible, and even more shameful that it has taken so long to finally get the law on the books to begin with. It would be more than a little interesting to know just how much money would have been saved if it had been in effect from the very beginning.

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Chamber of Commerce President Juan Pan Guerrero's upset at the CNMI being compared to Kuwait - as Congressional staffer Al Stayman has apparently done - is puzzling indeed. Guerrero voiced the concern at the Chamber's meeting this past week. In few other places does an "alien" work force outnumber resident citizens, as has happened in the CNMI. Kuwait happens to be one of the other places where that same situation occurs. Rather than rail at the comparison, Guerrero might better check to see what Kuwait may have found in the way of solving the problem. As was mentioned in an earlier column, what is being recommended there is the imposition of strict immigration rules but the liberalization of internal labor market rules - the reverse of what is being practiced in the CNMI.

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Those who may not have gotten enough of the rides featured at the Liberation Day fair may be interested to know that some of them have been moved to the Koblerville Youth Center, where they will form part of Family Fun Night EVERY Friday. 10% of the gross proceeds goes to ALL the Youth Centers in the CNMI.

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I guess it's too late to do anything about it now, but the initiative requiring a run-off election if no candidate for governor wins with a 50%+1 margin almost guarantees that there will be a run-off election every time there are more than two candidates for governor. The margin requirement might better have been along the lines of 45-47%.

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The current push for a non-voting delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives would be more credible, seems to me, if people were willing to acknowledge that originally the CNMI wanted to emphasize its difference from other U.S. entities, but has now found that that stance is not to its advantage. Along the same lines, does anyone else see the contradiction in the CNMI's wanting the right to control its own immigration, unlike the states, while at the same time wanting representation in Congress, like the states?

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New movies: "Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix" and "1408," both PG-13s, for a total of five PG-13s, 2 PG's and one P. For the first time, includes all five of this week's "rottentomatoes" list of top five box office hits.