

On My Mind
9/1407

As is to be expected, there is a bill intended primarily to win votes now sitting on the governor's desk that was passed in haste, without a hearing or committee reports in either House or Senate, and that may end up doing far more harm than good. House Bill 15-277 would allow certain (Class I) government employees who choose to leave government employment after as much as fifteen years of service to withdraw all of their contributions to the Retirement Fund. (Up until now, withdrawal has been restricted to those having been members/vested for no more than ten years.) A nice bundle of cash, right?

And, on the surface, it would be good for the Retirement Fund, too, because it would reduce what is called its unfunded liability - the Fund would no longer have to cover those employees' health insurance claims, or, years from now, pay those who withdrew their moneys, their retirement benefits.

However, there is a real risk, according to a Retirement Fund spokesperson, that the Retirement Fund could be sued if it does not pay out to those employees leaving government employment, not only the moneys they'd contributed, but also benefits they'd be entitled to if they had stayed in government. As I understand it, while the NMI Retirement Plan does not fall under the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA), nonetheless, it is expected to follow ERISA guidelines, and those guidelines call for payment of certain benefits even after an employee has withdrawn his/her contributions.

There is also the very real concern that, unless they immediately place their moneys into another annuity - an unlikely event - those who leave government employment early and withdraw their contributions to the Retirement Fund will suffer in the long run, because they will have no "security blanket" to provide income and health insurance coverage as they get older - as their retirement annuity would have done.

It will be interesting to see what the governor does with the bill.....

A timely article in the August 20 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine complains about light pollution, and how much more people saw in the skies 400 years ago than people do today. Famed pioneer astronomer Galileo, in 1610, saw more with his primitive telescope, reports David Owen, author of the article, than today's ordinary telescopes can see - not because of a difference in technology, but because the contrasts between lights in the sky and darkness on earth were so much greater then than now. He particularly notes the Milky Way, which most people today cannot see. Even on a moonless night on the rim of the Grand Canyon, the brightest light is not the Milky Way, but the lights of Las Vegas, 175 miles away, he complains.

Due to air pollution that has made the atmosphere less transparent and more reflective, and to high levels of what he calls "terrestrial illumination," "a person standing on the observation deck of the Empire State Building on a cloudless night would be unable to discern much more than the moon, the brightest planets and a handful of very bright stars - less than one percent of what Galileo would have been able to see with or without a telescope," he writes.

"Excessive, poorly designed outdoor lighting wastes electricity, imperils human health and safety, disturbs natural habitats, and, increasingly, deprives many of us of a direct

relationship with the nighttime sky, which throughout human history has been a powerful source of reflection, inspiration, discovery and plain old jaw-dropping wonder," he continues.

The concern with light pollution is world wide; a non-profit organization begun in Tucson in 1988 has now become the International Dark-Sky Association - its mission: to preserve and protect the nighttime environment and our heritage of dark skies through quality outdoor lighting.

Owen points out that most lights are far brighter than they need to be. They light up areas that don't need it - like trees and other vegetation around street lights - adversely affecting bird and insect habitat; they make it difficult to see in the dark once one leaves a lighted area, endangering humans; they shine into people's homes, disturbing human sleep cycles; they create a glare in drivers' eyes, endangering pedestrians and drivers alike; they light up shorelines, disturbing marine habitat and endangering turtles. Nor do bright lights always deter crime. Lights should enable people to notice criminal activity and make it difficult for criminals to see what they are doing. Bright lights on isolated buildings or on parts of buildings passersby can't see don't do either of those things. A flashlight (of a criminal) or an alarm set off by a motion sensor are far more effective deterrents, Owen notes.

Cities can save millions of dollars by using lights known as "full cutoff" - that is they cast no light above the horizontal plane and use a light source that cannot be seen by someone standing to the side - and by lowering their wattage.

The CNMI's exterior light use typifies all that is wrong - with so many lights in neighborhoods that shine into others' windows, that light up trees and beaches, that create so-called glare bombs. Zoning restrictions could help, but maybe the CNMI - or CUC - needs a night light guru as well, who can help not only the CNMI, but individual people reduce their use of excessive night lighting so we can all again enjoy the stars, and the Milky Way.

There's a fascinating account of the trials and tribulations of the last trip of the Spanish galleon, the Santa Margarita, in one of the volumes of "The History of Micronesia: A Collection of Source Documents," a series of translated Spanish documents edited by Rodrigue Levesque and published over the last ten years or so. One wonders whether anyone involved in the current attempt to find "treasure" among the Santa Margarita's remains on the Rota reef has ever heard of the account, much less read it. Written by one of the survivors of the trip, the account says that after the galleon left Cavite, it was battered by one incredible storm after another, and was adrift for months before it made anchor on Rota. By then, according to the account, it had lost both its sails, had suffered a huge hole in its side, and had also lost tons of cargo that had been jettisoned just to stay afloat, as well as from the hole in its side. Most of its crew had died from hunger, sickness, injuries from the storm or simply by being swept out to sea.

The report notes that hundreds of villagers ransacked the ship because the remaining crew were too weak and too few to defend it. Given this account it seems highly unlikely that much of any real value still remains, despite promises by those still digging for treasure on Rota's reefs.

Let's hope the CNMI isn't depending on its share of the "treasures" to help bail it out of its ever- weakening economy.

Short Takes:

Let's hope, too, that the rumor is not true that government employees, whose contracts are up for renewal, are being told that their contract won't be renewed unless they switch to the Retirement Fund's defined contribution plan.....

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While we're at it, let's hope that Senate and subsequent gubernatorial approval of House Bill 15-39, which would lower CUC's reconnection fee and require more consideration and flexibility from CUC in making disconnections, occurs without delay. The relief is much needed!

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On the subject of CUC, it just doesn't seem credible that the electric fuel charge on bills to CUC customers is not affected by government agencies' and delinquent customers' non-payment, as its PIO is alleged to have asserted in an article in Thursday's *Saipan Tribune*. If that were indeed so, it would seem that CUC would be facing bankruptcy as it fell deeper and deeper into debt with every passing day. If it is not so, who, and how, is the cost of the non-payers' fuel being covered?

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Nor is there much credibility to the long-delayed spin finally put out by the governor's press secretary regarding the governor's now infamous remark about protestors at the August 15 U.S. House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs hearing all being illegal. It took a whole month to come up with that story? Puh-leeze!

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Those concerned about being able to cast an absentee ballot for President in the U.S. 2008 elections despite being registered to vote in the CNMI should rest assured that it is possible to do both, provided the absentee ballot is submitted under the provisions of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA). Moreover, rules in sixteen states have eased, giving eligibility to citizens who have never lived in the U.S. Details can be found at < <http://www.fvap.gov/vao/citnvrinus.html> >.

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The "Letters to the Editor" section in today's *Trib* included the most eloquent defense of libraries and librarians I've seen in a long time. The letter by Sudi Napalan was about school library media programs, to be exact, but actually applies far more broadly. Napalan wrote, "Reading is fundamental to all kinds of learning. Students who read more, read better. Students who can read better, learn better. Students read and learn more if they have a ready supply of quality resources and a knowledgeable guide." Truer words were never spoken!

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Free "golden oldie" movies at the American Memorial Park theater: Oct. 19, *Captain Blood*, starring Errol Flynn; Oct. 7, *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi; October 31, *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff; Nov. 4, *Sergeant York*, starring Gary Cooper, and Dec. 2, *Holiday Inn*, starring Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, and many others. All start at 2:00 p.m.

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New movies: *The Nanny Diaries*, PG-13, and *Superbad*, R, for a total of 2 R's, 5 PG 13's, 1 PG - not a one worth commenting on.....