

On My Mind  
9/28/07

Five weeks until election! Somehow, the climate seems different from past years. Or maybe it's just that this is a mid-year election, and I've forgotten that they're different from the gubernatorial elections. But I've heard no blaring of speakers at evening rallies in my neighborhood, seen far less signboards up on the roads, and far fewer ads in the local papers. Of course, it could also be that with so many independent candidates in the race, there just isn't the funding to rent venues and speaker systems, to pay for the posters and ads. Or could be that they're all waiting to splurge this coming last month....

I like Kagman's approach - where the community got together, and scheduled a forum for all candidates running for office in that district, regardless of party. That's quite an achievement in this place where politics is a major sport - a group coming together in an a-political way for the benefit of the entire community.

The Saipan Chamber of Commerce is also holding forums for all candidates regardless of party, or non-affiliation thereto, and these too will be held according to precinct. But in the Chamber's case, they will all be held at the same venue, and they won't be free - the Chamber is using the event as a fund-raiser. Granted the fund-raiser is for a good cause - to support scholarships - but there still is something that grates on my nerves in a community-based organization charging admission for candidate forums intended as voter education. Where voter education is such a critical factor towards an informed outcome, charging for it strikes me as just too crassly commercial. Chamber forums will be held at 6:30 p.m. at the Fiesta Hotel on October 15 for precincts 2 & 4, October 16 for precinct 5, October 17 for precinct 3, and October 18 for precinct 1, with a forum for Senate candidates on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. Tickets are \$20.00 at the door, \$15.00 in advance, and \$7.00 for students.

Voter education is also underway on the three initiatives that will be on November's ballot. The initiatives will be debated at two sessions scheduled for Thursday, October 4 and Thursday, October 11. The first session will be held at Northern Marianas College classroom D-1 from 5:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m., where both the legislative initiative on run-off elections and the legislative initiative on the establishment of a higher education commission will be debated. The October 11 session, where the popular initiative to establish a casino on Saipan will be debated, will be held at the Multi-purpose Center in Susupe, starting at 5:30 p.m.

Both sessions are open to the general public, and both are free. They have been planned by a small group aspiring to form a League of Women Voters in the CNMI that decided to work on voter education first and League membership later, including Lisa Hacskaylo, Institutional Researcher at NMC, local journalist Ruth Tighe and NMC chair of the Department of Social Studies and Fine Arts Sam McPhetres - with much assistance from McPhetres' Current Issues class and Commonwealth Election Commission Executive Director Gregorio C. Sablan.

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The two legislative initiatives propose to amend the CNMI constitution. They were initiated by the legislature, which required approval by three-fourths of the members of each house in order to be put on the ballot. The amendments will require approval by a majority of the votes cast to go into effect.

The third initiative would enact a law authorizing casino gambling on Saipan and was proposed by popular initiative, requiring the signatures of twenty percent of the qualified voters in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Senatorial District, i.e., Saipan. It would become law, per Article IX, Section 1(d) of the CNMI Constitution, "if approved by two-thirds of the persons from the senatorial district who are qualified to vote."

Rota voters will also have a local initiative on its ballot, proposing the establishment, regulation and control of casino gambling in the 1<sup>st</sup> Senatorial District, i.e., Rota. People concerned about the casino initiative should make a point of reading both Saipan and Rota's initiative. The difference is like night and day - with Rota's representing daylight.

The Election Commission hopes to make copies of the initiatives available on-line shortly.

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The whole scenario about jobs to be abolished, jobs to be retained - today's headlines say 1,000 may be lost - is confusing, to say the least. According to media reports, funds for 397 contracts will run out in December, but on the other hand, funds are available for 267 vacant full time positions. So how come they don't just say that funds for 130 contracts will run out? And whose contracts are at issue? How is it being decided who stays and who leaves? Who gets transferred or re-hired for the available openings and who doesn't? Wouldn't it work better - be less political and more fair - if agencies were told they have to cut "n" positions, and let them decide whom they can spare and whom they can't?

Or is the whole thing yet another of those unresearched, uncoordinated, spur-of-the-moment "Let's run it up the flag pole and see if it flies" ideas the governor keeps throwing out?

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A great new book and a "must read" for anyone who wants to understand CNMI reality is John Bowe's "Nobodies: modern American slave labor and the dark side of the new global economy." Bowe, an award-winning journalist for his writings about social justice and public policy for the common good, looks at three locations where what he calls "labor slavery" is still practiced: Florida and its illegal immigrants, Oklahoma and its imported workers from India, and Saipan and its imported foreign workers.

Bowe is not nearly so negative and critical as most people who write about the CNMI's use of foreign workers. Not only does he write well - describing the open skies thus: "...I didn't even know how to look at it properly because it seemed twenty times bigger than any sky I knew....Completely separate weather systems seemed to slide past like herds of different species, unrelated animals, some loping, others galloping...three rainbows out to sea, four patches of sunlight, shafting down with creamy blue and mercury linings behind them...." Pure poetry!

He also writes knowledgeably and empathetically - about cultural conflicts, about local politics, about the unbalanced economy, and is not afraid to name names. For example: "Soon I learned the two most significant facts about Saipan: life was pleasant - at least for citizens; and (differently than, say in a tropical Third World country) life was defined by a palpable atmosphere of disconnect. Things were always wrong, a little out of sync, unfinished, unrepaired, yet it seldom seemed to matter."

Or: "What Americans saw as tendencies to laziness, nepotism, graft and corruption in the islands were, from the islander point of view, matters of long-standing culture and respect essential to enable people to get along in a small place. Tribal culture, to a degree Americans didn't - and still don't - usually understand, is entirely family-oriented. It's not just a neat thing - "Hey, you're my cousin." It's everything: it's me and my family and my cousins against you and your family and your cousins."

Bowe visited Saipan over 3 ½ years, meeting and talking with people on almost every level, every sphere of activity. - Interestingly, though, he doesn't have much to say about the church and its role.

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Short takes:

The *Saipan Tribune* has finally put names of islands on its new expanded weather map, as well as making the markings for the longitudinal lines readable. THANK-YOU, THANK-YOU! Sure beats looking at cloud formations and not knowing how it all affects the CNMI.

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The lawn at the Commonwealth Health Center's upper entry point is looking a lot better. There are only a few thoughtless people still tossing their cigarette butts on the lawn rather than in containers. Now, if they'd only stop smoking altogether, think how much better they - and we - would all be!

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The coconut wireless has it that the fight over who will operate the CNMI child care program is purely political. Apparently the administration is unhappy with certain public school officials, and the move to remove this program from PSS and put it under the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs was undertaken in retribution. Capability, experience, knowledge, past history, are not the issue. How sad. In regard to the gross cut in the budget of the Office of the Public Auditor - as well as that of the Washington Rep's office - it doesn't need the coconut wireless to confirm that this, too, is purely political.

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Two worthy events this Saturday which received insufficient public notice - where is that sorely needed calendar of local events??? - Marianas' High School production of "Up the Down Staircase" at the Multipurpose Center with a matinee at 1:30 p.m. and evening performance at 6:30 p.m., and "110 Flights," being performed at the American Memorial Park Theater by Nahal Navidad's Fabulous Invalid Theatre Company at 7:00 p.m.

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An upcoming event for October, which has disappeared from the papers' community calendars: American Memorial Park's showing of *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi on October 7<sup>th</sup>, at 2:00 p.m. in the park's theater.

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This will be the last column for two, or maybe three, weeks, as I will be off-island visiting relatives in Germany. A reminder: if, at another time, my column does not come through via e-mail, readers might want to check the web-sites. Sometimes, as was true last week, it is only the e-mail delivery that gets messed up, not delivery of the column per se.

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New movies: "The Game Plan," rated PG ("safe, sappy, family fare") and "The Kingdom," rated

R, for three R's, three PG-13's and one PG.</P>