

On My Mind
11/02/07

Election tomorrow! By this time, it's probably too late to say anything other than: please think carefully about your vote! The CNMI's future will be determined by who and what you vote for! Of course, that's true - to some extent or other - in every election but this year, with the economy doing so poorly, and the power situation so precarious, it will matter more than usual. I would only remind voters that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is....

This is probably not the right time to bring this up - given that everyone will be pre-occupied with the elections and the results thereof, but nonetheless, it is a disaster waiting to happen, and I'd hate to be told, afterwards, that if only I'd brought it up sooner, the disaster would not have occurred.

The potential disaster? Thousands of gallons of used oil spilling into our lagoon, spoiling the lagoon and destroying the reef - and thereby what's left of the tourism industry, and our economy - for years thereafter. How could this happen? Simple. Used oil is being stored at CUC, near the shoreline. That's bad enough, but the problem is that the containers - a huge tank as well as many smaller drums - are all old, in poor condition, and rusting away. The large storage tank is, of course, the biggest threat - it could spring a leak even without waiting for a typhoon to put a hole in it. Hoping that such a leak could be stopped before devastating damage is done to the shoreline, the lagoon and the reef is just plain foolish.

Of course, it will cost money to find a fix - like putting it into a tanker and sending it off for refinement somewhere. But it will cost much, much, much more - indeed, if it is possible at all - to try to restore the ruined lagoon, reef, shoreline. Nonetheless, as one knowledgeable and experienced businessman told me, "If there's a will, there's a way." Since this problem has already been brought to the attention of the administration and the legislature some time ago - and no action has yet been taken - it would appear that neither have the will to do anything about it. It's pretty scary to think that one might have to wait til a new legislature gets sworn into office before this very real threat to the CNMI's faltering economy is abated.

On the subject of the suffering economy, two recent items - one a letter to the editor in the *Pacific Daily News*, the other a Reuter news story in a recent issue of the *Marianas Variety*, raise an interesting question. In the letter to the editor, the writer observes that most Chinese travelers tend to be "budget" travelers. That is, they are frugal, and they like to bargain.

The Reuters story mentions that to Koreans, the word "four" sounds like "death" in Korean, and that a new hotel being built to cater to Korean tourists in Los Angeles thus has no fourth or fourteenth floor.

No doubt there are other characteristics of both Chinese and Koreans that might influence their tourist preferences. The question is, is the CNMI doing anything about these traits? Or about trying to find out what other traits tourists from these countries have that might affect their choice of where to travel? And if not, why not? Surely, when every dollar (or yen or won or yuan) counts, you'd think that such simple steps would have been taken and acted on long since.

Or isn't this within the scope of the Marianas Visitors Authority?

The Office of the Public Auditor has released its comments on House Bill 15-313, a bill that looks, at first, like it would finally clear the way to issuance of a credible request for proposal (RFP) for privatizing CUC. However, once one reads through the eleven-page document, it becomes clear that once again, forces are at play that are not in the best interests of the Commonwealth. Introduced by Francisco S. Delacruz, Chairman of the Public Utilities, Telecommunications/Communications Committee, the bill contains a number of sections restricting the rights of prospective bidders, in addition to removing the Office of the Public Auditor from the appeal process.

Maybe it's time there was an appeal to the U.S. Department of Interior to take over CNMI's power generation and distribution as well? Sure seems like those responsible in the CNMI - be they legislative, administrative or CUC officials - just aren't capable of operating it themselves.

I see that the licensing board gave Loyola's proposed school of medicine its approval to proceed. Perhaps in the process, the misconceptions that seem to have arisen will fall away, as people understand more about how such institutions usually operate. In a recent letter to the editor a writer expressed concern about training "flunkers" - those unable to get into U.S. medical schools, who Loyola's sponsors have said are among the students to whom the institution is geared. But the criterion of whether a medical student receives a license to practice medicine is not based on where that student went to school, but on whether the student can pass required licensing exams. On its web site, the American Medical Association specifically mentions physicians who have graduated from schools outside the U.S. as being eligible to take those exams.

Another writer protested the idea of having medical or nursing school students practice on her children. To the best of my knowledge, all teaching hospitals allow students to treat patients. It is, of course, done under close supervision. Students are not put into positions where they would endanger their patients' lives! Moreover, having students treat patients not only gives the medical students a chance to experience the real thing before they are out on their own, but it also makes available to people living in the area medical care at often reduced fees. Just as there are beauty schools that advertise haircuts and perms by students at reduced costs, so are there dental and health clinics operated primarily by students/interns that offer reduced costs.

It would be a coup to have, in the CNMI, a reputable, bona fide teaching hospital. A Google search did not reveal whether the CNMI's Loyola University is related to any other institution by that name, nor disturbingly enough, did it reveal a Dr. Johnny Fong, identified in local news stories as Loyola's board chairman and CEO, as being a member of the American Medical Association. I know that not all doctors join AMA, but join specialty organizations instead. Though I did find a Dr. Johnny Fong listed as a non-AMA member in a physician-finder website as being a pediatrician in Fresno, I could find no further listings for him - which does give some pause. Let us hope he is, indeed, what he says he is, and that CNMI officials have checked him out!

This month's *Commonwealth Register* is fat indeed - with, in the Emergency Regulations - over 100 pages listing increases in fees for Commonwealth Health Center services. Interested persons have until November 16 to comment. Also issued as Emergency Regulations is an amendment to the Immigration Regulations that "refines the scope of permissible activities for foreign workers who are employed in facilities that serve alcoholic beverages."

Included as Proposed Regulations are rules and regulations dealing with a proposed Wednesday street market under the aegis of the Carolinian Affairs Office, extensive new regulations for the CNMI Historic Preservation Office, and regulations related to the establishment, control and maintenance of municipal parks on Tinian - which are also open for comment until November 16.

The October *Register* also includes notice of adoption of regulations providing for an identification card on Tinian, and Executive Order 07-10, that says "The lead agency for the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) should be by [sic] the Department of Community Affairs, Child Care Licensing Division....The CCDA Child Care Licensing Division shall be in control of the Child Care Development Fund and DCCA shall set aside sufficient funds for the PSS administered after school program."

Short takes:

First of all, congratulations to Palau President Tommy Remengesau for being included in *Time Magazine's* just published list of environmental heroes! I haven't seen the *Time* article, but according to other reports, Remengesau was among 43 environmentalists world-wide recognized by the magazine for their efforts to preserve and protect the environment. Palau, under Remengesau's leadership, has been on the forefront of pro-active environmentalism in the Pacific for some time. It's nice to see that his efforts have now received much deserved international recognition.

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Can someone please explain to me why the CNMI, particularly Saipan, needs TWO swim clubs? Isn't there enough competition within the one? Are there really so many aspiring swimmers that the existing club can't accommodate them? What gives here?????

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Another question: Whatever happened to the relatively new restaurant Mediterranean Lamp, I believe it was called? It seems to have disappeared overnight, in total silence.

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Request to reporters: When writing about court cases and judges' rulings or verdicts, how about identifying the attorneys for both sides? That would not only help the public become more familiar with the work of island attorneys, but would also serve to give credit to the attorneys who prevailed in whatever the issue was.

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Having recently traveled the miles of corridor at the Saipan airport yet again, I think that rather than focusing on providing artistic walls for travelers to look at, more attention should be paid to easing the stress those long walks put on the less-athletic traveler. Not that I don't support giving artists their due, but us handicapped deserve some consideration too!

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Lastly, for what it's worth, I don't consider "On My Mind" a blog. It comes out only weekly, it focuses on contemporary events rather than personal matters, and it does not provide for commentary (though feedback via e-mail is welcome). I would argue that it more closely resembles a columnist's output - even though currently denied publication in the press.

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New Movies: "American Gangster," rated R, and "Bee Movie," rated PG, for a total of 4 R's, 1 PG-13, and 2 PG's. What a pity that "Sharkwater," rated PG, which also opened this week, and is so relevant to the CNMI, isn't on the list.

"On My Mind" can also be found on the web at <<http://net.saipan.com/cftemplates/omm/index.cfm>>, at <www.chamorro.com>, or at <www.cnmi.net> (just click on "News & Weather").

If you missed a column due to an overfull mailbox or whatever, you can find it in the "Archives" section.

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