

On My Mind
3/28/08

It sounded most encouraging: a public meeting of the Mayor's Neighborhood Watch Task Force, at which its members would "gather preliminary areas of concern about the increasing number of criminal activities" in Saipan villages. Here was a sign that people were finally recognizing that government cannot resolve all the island's problems, take care of everyone's concerns, and that community members were now ready to take on the challenge and begin to work on their own to try make things better.

According to a story in the *Saipan Tribune* earlier this week, a Saipan and Northern Islands Municipal Council Neighborhood Enhancement and Revitalization Team has also been formed, and will be meeting with villagers to discuss how to revitalize and enhance their villages - starting with Chalan Kanoa.

Another indicator that at least some community members were apparently beginning to recognize that government can't do it all, and that maybe it's time they themselves took on some responsibilities.

It would be nice to think that Beautify CNMI! May have had something to do with this - the concept of volunteering, of taking things into one's own hands, of accepting some responsibility for the welfare of the community, the island as a whole. But regardless of where it came from, it seemed a good sign. If things are to change, that change will have to come from, by, through, the people, the members of the community. And it looked as though members of the community, of the general public, were finally sitting up and taking notice, finally deciding to do more than just complain, finally willing to participate in helping themselves and their villages become better, safer, more enjoyable places to live.

It sounded good, but the response was more than a little disappointing. The meeting, at the Susupe multi-purpose center, was co-hosted by the Office of the Mayor of Saipan and the Northern Islands Municipal Council. There were, in fact, more policemen in attendance than there were community members. Disheartening indeed!

Oddly enough, the meeting called to discuss the neighborhood watch was dominated by newly-appointed acting commissioner of the Department of Public Safety Clyde Narita, who gave a power point presentation on community policing - as opposed to traditional-type policing - and the strategies and advantages of the former over the latter. It was an interesting presentation, and much of what Narita offered made a lot of sense: the value of getting police back into the neighborhoods, their being pro-active and trying to work with the community to find solutions to problems rather than just ticketing those who break the law, getting stakeholders involved.

However, his statement, repeated more than once, that neighborhood watches did not work and were not worth doing unless done as one small piece within the framework of community policing, seemed counter-productive, particularly since Narita cautioned that community policing could only be done one village at a time. It is not a one-style-fits-all approach, since each village is different, and will have its own style of operation, he said.

Yes, police involvement is necessary to neighborhood watch programs. And yes, community-based policing's bottom-up approach makes sense. But to wait until community-based policing is successfully launched in every village before undertaking any kind of neighborhood watch program just doesn't make any sense at all.

The evening ended with brief comments by Police Officer II Jason Tarkong on work under way by the Mayor's Task Force - gathering information from the web, modifying forms and other publications for local use, etc. - and by Municipal Council Vice Chairman Ramon B. Camacho on the Revitalization project. He said the formation of that group was, in fact, prompted by Beautify CNMI! - which focusses on beach fronts and roads - and the question as to whether and why a similar approach could not be brought inside the villages as well.

For those who might think otherwise, the offer by Ocean Legacy to establish, in the upper portion of the Mariana Islands chain, what would become the world's second largest marine sanctuary (the largest being the one recently established in Hawaii) is not going to be "on the table" indefinitely - and certainly not until 2009, when elections might bring a change in the position of the present CNMI administration.

Ocean Legacy, a funding group led by the Pew Trust's Environment Group, intends to establish "three to four large, world-class, no-take marine reserves that will provide ecosystem-scale benefits and help conserve the global marine heritage" within the next 3 ½ years. The CNMI area is only one of four areas - and the only U.S.-affiliated one - that Ocean Legacy has identified as having the potential for development of such a "park of the sea."

The time crunch for the CNMI is due to the process by which the marine sanctuary would be declared a "national monument," thus becoming eligible for national support and protection as is true of the Hawaii monument. It also explains why the park is being described as a "monument." It all stems from the Antiquities Act of 1906, which authorizes the President of the U.S. to declare lands as national monuments "for the purpose of protecting sites and objects of antiquity." This is further defined to include "other objects of historic or scientific interest." The act gives the President this authority without the need to go through the U.S. Congress.

President Bush, for all his shortcomings, is and has been supportive of marine conservation and ocean protection, as can be seen in his funding of the

coral reef initiative, among other programs. He has already invoked the Antiquities Act to declare the islands of northwestern Hawaii a national monument. He is expected to approve a similar monument in the CNMI - provided the CNMI supports the establishment of such a "monument." But Bush's term ends in November of this year, and regrettably, none of the three presidential candidates has expressed any particular interest in things marine, oceanic.

The proposal has been deemed a "no-brainer" by most who are aware of the proposal - with its protection of marine resources, its promise of world-wide attention to the CNMI, its assurance of increased tourism, scientific research, economic investment - all at no cost to the CNMI - what is there to object to?

Perhaps if the governor - who has said the time is not now - were to understand that the occasion of the declaration of the CNMI monument would guarantee a photo-op with the President of the U.S. - as Hawaii's Governor Linda Lingle had not quite two years ago - he might be more receptive to the idea?

Short takes:

Contrary to popular belief, there cannot be a vote on constitutional initiatives until the legislature has adopted the initiatives to be voted on, and the Election Commission has set a date that gives it adequate time to educate the public and otherwise prepare for the vote to take place.

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Did anyone notice that the winners of the Humanities Council-sponsored Covenant Day debate this past Wednesday on whether non-citizens should be allowed to serve on the jury both took the affirmative side - that is, spoke in support of the idea? Now if only dramatic coaches of this and similar events realized that the number of words squeezed into any given time frame is less important than inflection and expression of emotion, I, at least, would be a lot happier!

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Brad Doerr's letter to the editor, "The Great Saipan Land Rush...not!" - which appears in today's *Trib* - should be must reading! It is by far the most persuasive and best articulated defense I've yet seen for retaining the CNMI Constitution's Article XII as it is.

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In contrast, Senate President Pete P. Reyes' concern with costs in insisting that the governor's state of the CNMI speech be given at the Legislature seems pretty silly - after all, it could just as easily be held at Susupe and NO food and drinks offered afterwards....

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Among this week-end's offerings: Baseball classic "Pride of the Yankees" starring Gary Cooper and Teresa Wright at American Memorial Park on Sunday

at 2:00 p.m. (Free); NMI Humanities Council's "Let Freedom Ring" celebration at the Susupe multi-purpose center Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.; last chance to try handmade soba noodles at the Aqua Resort's Sunday brunch.

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Please note: there will be no column for the next two weeks, as I will be off-island. The column will resume - barring unforeseen circumstances - on April 18.