

On My Mind

10/10/08

The federal government is often referred to as a single entity, and, in the CNMI, is often maligned as such - the whole complicated machinery, with its dozens of layers of authority and bureaucracy, its hundreds of agencies, its millions of employees - the entire body condemned, rejected, reviled, for the act of a single part. It's a good thing it doesn't operate that way - the whole body refusing to listen, or assist, or negotiate when one of its parts is attacked.

The CNMI is fortunate that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for one, appears to be showing a willingness to be flexible, accommodating, in regard to the Aggrekko generators the CNMI has leased in such haste, despite the fact that the CNMI is threatening to sue other parts of its body, so to speak, and despite the fact that the CNMI knowingly violated some of EPA's rules and regulations in the process.

The thoughts of the Aggrekko generators being shut down by EPA because of violations of its Clean Air Act provisions are hardly bearable.

One of the speakers at the candidate forum earlier this week said he did not support federalization because it would mean a loss of jobs for approximately 130 people in Labor and Immigration offices. While that reflects admirably on the candidate's concern for the welfare of his constituents, it doesn't reflect nearly so well on his concern for the welfare of the government. It has long been recognized that the most critical element in reducing government expenditures is cutting payroll - reducing the number of government employees. Yet at every opportunity those in office do their best to protect the warm bodies already on the government payroll and to add more warm bodies to the existing payroll, not to mention finding ways to also increase their benefits.

That is not the way to economic survival.

It would be far better if the same amount of time, energy, and effort - and funding! - were put into finding ways to help the unemployed find jobs - be it through mentoring, training programs, support for further education, assistance in small business operation, career counseling, etc. Of course, that might entail work on the part of the job-seeker, but that is what gainful employment is all about. Government needs to become a lot leaner in order to work properly, and such sentiments as expressed by the candidate don't help.

Who has the authority to decide what happens to the CNMI's Marianas House once it is vacated by our Washington delegate? Is it up to the legislature, given that it is an asset - that must now be disposed of (the CNMI purchased the house)? Or does it fall

under the responsibility of the Secretary of Finance? Could it - by some stretch of the imagination - be considered public land, and therefore fall under the Secretary of the Department of Public Lands (heaven help us all!)? Or, by an even larger stretch of the imagination, could the governor co-opt possession, using it for his ends alone?

No doubt it has amassed considerable value over the years, and could well bring in a respectable addition to the CNMI coffers if it were sold - despite the slumps in the economy in general and in housing in particular. It is, after all, located in Washington, D.C., and since it is an election year, not only will there be new members of Congress, but there will also be new staff coming in under the new president - all looking for a place to live and work.

It could, of course, be leased or rented, but that would entail providing on-going upkeep and maintenance - a responsibility the CNMI is not very good at - and therefore could put the house at risk in terms of maintaining its value.

The decision should be made sooner rather than later, so that arrangements for disposal of the house's furnishings and equipment in the house could be made in an orderly manner, and at no loss to the CNMI government.....

Those who like to plan ahead might want to mark their calendars for two events occurring on Saturday, October 18th at the American Memorial Park Visitor's Center. From 9:00 a.m. til noon, the subject will be "Indigenous land rights in the Pacific - Views from Hawaii and the South Pacific" and will be presented by two speakers: "The rights of indigenous peoples under U.S. and international law" by visiting University of Hawaii law professor Jon Van Dyke; and by Dr. Ron Crocombe, professor emiritus at South Pacific University, who will talk on "Constraints on Land Rights in the South Pacific: Ethnicity, Descent, Citizenship, Residence, Wealth and Need," and on "The Current Drive for Land Reform in the South Pacific."

At 6:30 p.m. that evening, Professor Van Dyke will present a second lecture, on "What are Marine Monuments." Questions to be addressed include: What are the obligations of countries to establish marine protected areas under international law to protect rare and fragile ecosystems? What kinds of marine protected areas have been established in the United States and other countries? What is a "monument" under the U.S. Antiquity Act? What management procedures have been developed to govern marine protected areas and marine monuments? How is the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands governed? What activities are allowed and what problems have been identified? Is commercial fishing allowable in the marine protected area? What is the role of the community in governing marine protected areas? Professor Van Dyke will field questions from the audience at the conclusion of his talk.

Both presentations are sponsored by the Northern Mariana Islands Council for the Humanities.

Short takes:

Monument supporters who have previously written letters of support to the President and to the Council on Environmental Quality might want to send another letter - or a copy of their original - since the official comment period on the monument only began with the announcement of a public hearing on the proposal which was issued September 30, 2008. Deadline for comments, is October 26. According to the press release, "comments can be submitted via email to < oceans@ceq.eop.gov >, or via mail to Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, 722 Jackson Place, NW, Washington, D.C. 20503.

Comments can also be dropped off at ... the visitor center of the American Memorial Park, Beach Road, Garapan, Saipan, between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. To be considered in the final assessment comments must be received no later than October 26, 2008."

*

I was absolutely appalled at the account of the derogatory language being used against Representative Tina Sablan in the House of Representatives, as described in Ed Probst's letter to the editor in today's Saipan Tribune. The media have been reporting a decline of civility in court houses and legislatures across the country. But such a sexist attack? Here in the CNMI? Most disturbing!!! I would urge those who find it equally appalling to tax the House Speaker with keeping a firmer grip on the members of the House, and perhaps even particularly chastising the perpetrator. As Probst said, Representative Sablan is perfectly capable of holding her own, but that doesn't mean we should let it pass unnoticed..

*

Only one reader bothered to point out that my take on the swearing-in of Perry Tenorio was in error - I had said, in last week's column, that the Supreme Court wasn't in need of another justice, so the unseemly haste in swearing him in would appear to be profligate. But I was wrong - at least in part - because Tenorio was sworn in as a judge of the Superior Court, which the reader informed me is/was in need of more judges. Which doesn't explain the haste. But that's another story. My apologies for the error, and my thanks to the reader who pointed it out.

*

Thanks, too, to the sponsors of this past Wednesday night's candidate debate at the multi-purpose center: the Office of Youth Affairs, the Associated Students of NMC, and the CNMI Youth Congress. They made it possible for people to hear the candidates (all but Luis Crisostomo, who did not participate) at no cost - which is as it should be. The Chamber of Commerce also conducts a debate for all candidates, but it charges admission - and even though we are told the fees go towards the Chamber's scholarship fund, it just does not seem right to me to have to pay to obtain what should be public information.

*

Will the governor do the right thing and apologize to the Chinese tourists who

were, judging from all reports, subjected to unreasonable searches upon their arrival in the CNMI last Saturday? Will he file a protest with the Drug Enforcement Agency, and demand that it, too, apologize to the victimized Chinese tourists?

*

Question of the week: Will Bishop Tomas Camacho honor the Tanapag village fiesta with his presence this Sunday, or will he, as usual, attend Rota's instead?