

On My Mind
12/19/08

Senator Maria Fraca T. Pangelinan's "op-ed" piece on the CNMI budget, which appeared in Thursday's *Saipan Tribune* is long, but worth reading every word. It's important that people understand the process, and understand, in particular, what went into this one for 2009. Agencies such as the Public School System, which are already complaining about it, appear not to have read or understood what this budget does, what it offers. Instead of asking for more money - which will only come at the expense of some other agency - the agencies must look within their own operations, and do their own prioritizing to find the means to live within their budget. Only if everyone does his/her share, will the process succeed, will the monetary condition of the government stabilize, and, eventually recover.

The legislature has done its job, and from Pangelinan's report, it sounds like it was a good job, in which all participated, and to which all agreed. It is now up to the rest of the government to follow suit, and do its jobs of finding ways to live within its means.

There may be legitimate concerns re one item or another, and I can hardly complain about them being aired in the paper, but along with the public venting, hopefully PSS officials are also consulting with those who put the budget together and seeking realistic solutions.

President-elect Obama said it first: three keys to change [for the better] are service, responsibility, and sacrifice. Individuals, groups, agencies, government - all must *take responsibility* for their decisions and their actions; must *make sacrifices* to achieve progress, and must focus on *providing service* to the people. Not very euphonious - and maybe, sooner or later, someone will come up with a more memorable way of saying it, but for now, its SRS - Service, Responsibility, Sacrifice.

One action not mentioned by Obama at the time - though he too must be constantly faced with its challenge - is the setting of priorities. The less the funding available, the more important it is that focus be on the most important, the most needed, the one that provides the greatest "bang for the buck." It is never possible to do, to be, all things for all people, but when times are tough, it's more critical than ever that priorities are re-examined, and re-set in light of available resources and the extent of the need.

Ingenuity and volunteerism helps too. I liked the example set a couple of months ago by the Kagman students who took on fixing an electric wiring problem in their school without the need to wait for help or pay a contractor.

Cartoon character Pogo once said something to the effect that "the enemy is us" - in other words, we create our own downfall, our own failures. I would like to suggest that the opposite is also true: "the victor is us" - that is, we create our own successes. Or we could, we can, if we put our minds to it.

Well, the *Marianas Variety* really got it wrong this time, announcing - though buried on page 10 of today's issue - that the Public Utility Commission has approved a new rate structure for CUC, when the meeting of the PUC at which this will be voted on will not take place until 6:00 p.m. this evening when it meets at the Saipan Chamber of Commerce office.

An order has been prepared for the rate increase, but it has not been signed.

Many thanks to Representative Joseph J.N. Camacho for posting CUC's report to the PUC on the rate structure on his web site < <http://www.camachocnmi.com/> >! The proposed - but unsigned - order is one of the documents on that site.

PUC is generating reams of paper, with its stipulations, summaries, proposed orders and related documents, but if one takes the time to plow through them, it can be quite reassuring. PUC did well to find and contract with the Georgetown Consulting Group to help it do its job, and did equally well, from the looks of things, in choosing Guam's Harry Boertzel as its Hearing Judge. Both the firm and the judge are knowledgeable, experienced, informed, dedicated professionals.

And despite his lack of engineering background, word has it that CUC Executive Director Tony Muna has many of those same qualities, honed by his experience in the military. I hope the suggestion that now that an assistant director who is knowledgeable about power plants has been hired at CUC Muna can be let go, gets tossed in the waste basket. Among other things, organizations like CUC need both technical expertise and management skills to function properly; management and operation are two different things; both are full time responsibilities.

The new rate structure of \$.0230 per kilowatt hour being proposed is higher than what was once in effect, but also considerably lower than what has been experienced during some months this past year. If approved by the PUC, it will go into effect on January 1, 2009.

Where does privatization fit in? Rep. Camacho put it very well in his 12/05 comment on his web page on a "Unified plan for affordable and reliable power." Camacho points out that there are three parts to the power problem: fuel costs - where we are at the mercy of the market, management and personnel [which seem to be improving under Muna and the GCG], and the "sad state" of the generators. "But the real problem is finding the funding to repair or replace the engines at the power plant," he notes, and then asks, where is the plan to do so?

Says Camacho, "In fairness, there are people at the legislature, at the Administration and CUC who are working very hard to keep the power on. What is needed is to focus our collective energy into coming up with a unified workable plan. The federal government is willing to provide the funding to repair or replace the engines so that the people of the CNMI can have reliable and affordable power, **if the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Governor can come up with a unified workable plan.**

What that plan is, will take form if and only if the Governor and the Legislators sit down in the same room and hammer out a unified workable plan."

Of course, the "P" word is taboo in the CNMI - no one seems to know how to do it, or what to do with a plan once its drawn up, but the sad fact of the matter is, without a plan the CNMI will continue to get random proposals from random vendors all promising to save the CNMI without any mechanism in place to assess or evaluate them, or to negotiate with them.

Frankly, at this point, I'd give priority to a "summit" called for the purpose of developing a plan for reliable power generation rather than to a summit on economic development.

Short takes:

A good summary and overview of the status of the proposed Marianas Trench Monument can be found at < <http://honoluluweekly.com/cover/2008/12/legacy-blues/> >.

*

Unbelievable as it may sound, I actually agree with something written by Marianas Public Land Director John S. DelRosario, Jr.! He observed, in a letter to the editor in today's *Tribune* that former governor Juan N. Babauta was a little late in his call for a suit against the federal government to recover Compact impact funds.

*

I'd stopped noting movies showing at the local theater, thinking it wasn't having much of an effect. And maybe it's sheer coincidence, but this week, there isn't a single R-rated movie showing! Most appropriate for this time of year - thank-you.

*

Let us, during this season of love and renewal, think of others before ourselves, respect all our fellow human beings, be kind, caring and compassionate! Best wishes for a joyous Christmas and a fulfilling New Year!