

On My Mind

4/3/09

It is with some hesitation that I resume this column today, since, having isolated myself from events in the CNMI for the last 10 ½ weeks, I run the risk of not knowing or not understanding what may have taken place during that time, and thus completely misinterpret current events.</P>

Yet enough seems to call for comment to warrant the effort.....</P>

By far the most calamitous event that has occurred during that period - and indeed, is on-going - is the total destruction of a huge hillside of what had been scenic, unspoiled, environmentally productive Marpi land near Suicide Cliff. The Marpi area has long been considered the last piece of natural rural countryside on Saipan - to be treasured and protected as haven and native habitat for local species, as well as for its tranquil beauty and its loveliness - so in contrast to the jumble and busy-ness of developed island areas.</P>

Supposedly, the land is being cleared to rid it of unexploded ordinance, so the rules affecting the Environmental Protection Agency's "Brownfield" clearing program apply. With no cows that I know of having lost their lives due to unexploded ordinance in that area, one wonders, in the first place, how and why that particular piece of land was chosen for Brownfield clearing - and why now?</P>

Under EPA rules, Brownfield-cleared areas are to be returned to their former natural state once the clearing has been done, but that is not the intent here. Not only were too many trees cut down to make that a realistic goal, the intent appears to be that once the clearing is complete, the area will be used for homesteads. Wasn't the homestead program supposed to be suspended until the whole idea could be re-evaluated?</P>

One asks again, why this area, so visible to every tourist visiting Suicide Cliff? Can anyone point to a homestead area on Saipan that is not at least a partial eye-sore? Why is the CNMI deliberately creating another one in so conspicuous a spot?</P>

There is no power near by. There is no water. There are no sewer lines. Where is the money to come from to provide the necessary homestead infrastructure? What hardships would the homesteaders be subjected to - having to live at such a distance from stores, schools, government offices, all the amenities? How soon before auto repair shops, laundries, mom-and-pop stores clutter the landscape in addition to the incomplete and deserted homestead sites the homesteads breed?</P>

The powers that be need to put a stop to this project at once! It is a shameful embarrassment of poor planning, poor policy, poor practice that serves no one, but rather hurts us

all.</P>

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On the other hand, power - the biggest concern when I left in early January - seems to have stabilized, and now the administration is assuring us all that by the time the Aggrekko contract expires, CUC will once again be able to meet demand with its own old, now rehabilitated generators. What a switch from the prevailing cry at the time that permanent new generators were required to provide adequate power to Saipan!</P>

Unfortunately, details are lacking. How much longer will the old generators last? What sort of fuel should they be using? What assurances are there that there will be enough manpower and parts to maintain the generators as they should be, that they will continue to operate efficiently and effectively? What are the terms for maintaining a reliable fuel supply, maintenance equipment? Are our power problems REALLY solved, or are we being fed (re)election rhetoric? How is one to know?</P>

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The state of the economy does not seem to have improved, but neither do any reasonable, measurable, effective measures seem to have been taken to change the state of affairs. The Department of Interior is hosting yet another conference to encourage investors to come to the CNMI (in Hawaii, later this month); the CNMI Department of Commerce and the Commonwealth Development Authority are conducting yet another workshop to explore future industries the CNMI should pursue. So far, only aquaculture, agriculture, "edu-tourism" and call centers have been identified </P>.

Will something new emerge? Not so long as the same old talking heads keep their blinders on and view the situation the same old way, simply rephrasing all the same old stories! Not even the newly designated Marianas Trench Marine Monument has been mentioned - nor the CNMI's unique and ecologically diverse reef systems - with all their potential for scientific research and discovery, increased tourism, enhancement of marine science education and training.</P>

How, for example, can large, monied investors from the U.S. mainland - or elsewhere - still be expected to open operations in the CNMI? It was one thing when the CNMI had an unlimited supply of cheap labor, both skilled and unskilled. But that is no longer true. So what is the attraction? Yes, this is American territory. And everyone speaks English, sort of. And American law applies, sort of. And the CNMI has been called the gateway to the Pacific (but so is Guam).</P>

The cost of doing business - in time and bureaucratic paperwork - has not noticeably eased - indeed, it has become more complicated with the threat of federal take-over whose shape is not even yet fully defined. How tempting can that be to an investor?</P>

There's also a little-mentioned, little recognized, but very significant barrier to doing

business in the CNMI: its outdated, archaic, inefficient banking system. How long does it take to transfer funds? How many days before access to transferred funds is available? How much does it cost to move money? The whole process is absurd, unreasonable, unnecessary! It is frustrating enough for individuals who must deal with the system; for large investors it seems to me it simply would not be worth even trying!

The emphasis in the search for solutions to the economic dilemma should be on supporting and facilitating small business ventures - on providing opportunities in the private sector to absorb those who will, sooner or later, lose their government jobs, to take over many of the functions now performed by government (take grass-cutting, for example) that the private sector could do better, and cheaper.

Short takes:

- To the letter writer who complained that his grand-children were being asked to pick up dirty cigarette butts and thought it inappropriate: To the contrary, sir! What better way to teach them that smoking is a dirty habit, that cigarette butts don't biodegrade, and that cigarette butts all over the lawns and roadsides are ugly and spoil tourist attractions?

- To the senator who thinks smoking should be allowed in restaurants: being myself a victim of lung cancer, I can state unequivocally that smoking is bad for one's health. In fact, I'd argue that it is downright immoral to encourage others to continue bad habits that will cause them to sicken and yes, to die. You condemn not only the smokers, but those who must sit near them and those who must serve them to a future full of pulmonary problems, from emphysema and bronchitis to chronic obstructive lung disease and cancer. Is that the legacy you wish to promote?

- To our Representative in Congress: yes, a college education is a worthy goal (re the 3/27 letter to the editor in the *Marianas Variety*). But not everyone on this earth wants to go to college, would find college useful, has talents or interests that lie in the academic sphere. Working with one's hands, for example, is just as important and respectable and necessary to keep the world functioning - and can be just as rewarding. So please broaden the view here, and consider the world of trade as well!

- To the good Colonel: passing laws is not a good criterion for a good lawmaker. Part of the CNMI's problem is the number of poorly written, poorly conceived, politically motivated special interest laws that clog the books, the system, and the courts!

- And finally, to the administration: All across the U.S. public and private sector leaders are cutting work forces to meet budget cuts. A bloated work force is not a problem unique to the CNMI. Facing reality is a far healthier solution than continuing to maintain the fat. One might better study, adopt, adapt, copy, some of their strategies than deny the

truth.</P>