

On My Mind
4/24/09

This past week, both the CNMI and federal court have been holding trials of significant impact to the local community - at the federal court, the Lt. Governor, the former Secretary of Commerce and his wife are being tried for bribery, conspiracy to defraud, wire fraud and theft. In the local court, Gov. Benigno R. Fitial, Department of Finance, and Finance Secretary Eloy Inos are being sued by the Retirement Fund for the government's failure to make required payments to the Fund.

In the trial of the Lt. Governor et al, less than \$100,000, all told, is at stake. The issue deals with the payment of never-used supplies for the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation. In the local court, on the other hand, as much as \$200,000,000 is at stake, as well as the future economic welfare of several thousand government retirees. Yet the trial receiving all the coverage is the other one - the one in federal court. No stories have appeared in local papers about the Retirement Fund trial proceedings. Granted, there have been stories about the issues and about the players, but not about what actually transpired in court, what witnesses said, what the judge said, what the attorneys did and said. In sharp contrast is the extensive coverage of the other trial.

If nothing else, it serves as revealing commentary on where media priorities apparently lie. It also seems more people are sitting in to observe the trial of the Lt. Governor et al, than the trial brought against the Governor and the Secretary of Finance, but to what extent this is affected by the coverage in the press (or lack thereof) is not so clear.

The assertion that it doesn't really matter that the government did not make its full payments to the Retirement Fund over the past several years, because it would all have been lost as a result of the recent downturn in the stock market anyway, makes no sense to me.

Of course some of that money would have been lost as well - but it would only have been a portion of it. Presumably, the percentage of the funds lost due to the market fall would have remained the same. What would have been different is that the residual remaining after the fall would have been considerably larger than are the Fund's current holdings. Moreover, the Fund would not be quite as close to the brink of disaster as it is now, particularly since those monies would themselves have been earning dividends in the interim.

For those who might feel that 'the world is going to H— in a handbasket' as we used to say, Paul Hawken's book, "Blessed Unrest; How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice and Beauty to the World," offers some rose-colored glasses that brighten up that view considerably. Despite the gloom cast by big corpora-

tions that pollute the air, dump toxic chemicals into the ground, underpay their employees; despite world leaders who care more about their luxurious personal jets than the welfare of their people, despite the horror stories of melting glaciers and disappearing polar bears, Hawken says there is hope.

Where? According to Hawken, a phenomenon that has been little noticed is taking place all over the world: groups of people voluntarily getting together in small groups to solve local problems. This is not only a new phenomenon, Hawken writes, but it is also huge. He claims that world-wide, there are more than a million- maybe two million - such groups, all "intertwingling" (his word), all working on ecological sustainability, indigenous rights and social justice in their own communities.

The groups are informal, independent, not net-worked or connected to larger organized structures. The problems they are working on range from poverty and deforestation to peace, conservation, hunger, human rights. They are taking on river pollution, sustainable agriculture, energy conservation, trade policies by educating children, lobbying state legislators, writing letters and articles - issues and strategies as varied as the mind can think of. And all of it is focused on improving people's lives and lifestyles, on nurturing, protecting, conserving the earth's resources.

The intent of the movement, says Hawken, is "first [is] the Golden Rule; second is the sacredness of all life, whether it be a creature, child or culture."

Will this movement solve all the earth's problems? Writes Hawken, "The success of this movement will be defined by how rapidly it becomes a part of other sectors of society. If it remains singular and isolated, it will fail. If it is absorbed and integrated into religion, education, business and government, there is a chance that humanity can reverse the trends that beset the earth."

Lest anyone think this occurs only elsewhere, one need but look at the Beautify CNMI! movement, the local farmers' group, the newly-organizing groups concerned with the Retirement Fund, with opening up and improving the process of selecting candidates for office, to realize that the movement is alive and well in the CNMI.

Nearly half the book is a list of issues - with subheadings - that need to be addressed to achieve a just and sustainable world, together with a definition of the issues, some key words related to the issues, and a number indicating how many groups Hawken has been able to identify that are involved in addressing each issue and sub-issue.

A look at the list is an education in itself. It also, unwittingly, perhaps, reveals where present priorities would seem to be focused - as well as where more interest and action are needed. For example, some issues, such as "children and youth" and "community development" show thousands of organizations are involved; others, such as "coastal and marine ecosystems" and "fisheries" show less than 500 in all but one sub-category.

Websites related to the book are < www.wiserearth.org > and < www.naturalcapital.org >.

The *Saipan Tribune* reported, earlier this week, that a company called Allegiance Capital Corporation is considering investing \$100 million in the CNMI - it is proposing to take over the Lower Base port area - including the land on which power plant 1 sits - and re-designing the area to accommodate large military vessels all arriving at the same time. According to the paper, the project has been approved by the military.

It is perhaps the most promising proposed investment yet submitted to the CNMI - Allegiance Capital Corporation looks pretty substantial judging from its web page - but the size is somewhat daunting. It would bring major change to the islands, both in the number of people on island (an increase in the number of not only port employees required but also military personnel brought in by ships), and in the amount of money that would once again be circulating on island for local housing, foodstuffs, clothing, entertainment, hotels, restaurants, car sales, not to mention the increase in job opportunities, the increased demand for power, water, sewage disposal, telecommunications.....

There is a very real possibility that quiet, sleepy, peaceful Saipan would not survive such an onslaught. On the other hand, it is just as possible that the entire project could fail, given the government's past record of recalcitrance and greed. At this point it is not clear which outcome would be the more desirable.....

Short takes:

Kudos to the *Trib* for its ever-expanding "Community Briefs"! Two more upcoming events: the hearing scheduled this evening at the San Roque school on development of Kalabera Cave; a meeting at 6:00 p.m. Tuesday evening, May 5, at the multi-purpose center in Susupe with EPA's Region 9 Arora Pankaj on the Marpi Brownfield project.....

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Kudos as well to Tony Muna, former Special Assistant for the Office of Management and Budget and presently executive director of the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation, for his clear and concise account of the nature and extent of the government's debts to the Retirement Fund over the past several years, which appeared in the 4/22 issue of the *Trib*.

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And lastly, kudos to Mike Tripp for his great letter to the editor in the 4/22 issue of the *Marianas Variety*. Mike reminds us all that while the CNMI's Marine Monument offers much potential benefit to the CNMI, that benefit will not be realized unless people come forth and work to make it happen.