

On My Mind

7/03/09

To those who might be wondering what has happened to my column, the answer is it is again in limbo. Due to health factors, its appearance will remain intermittent for the foreseeable future. I came down with pneumonia last month, and spent a week in the hospital. While there I was told that what with my chronic obstructive lung disease (COPD), the cancer they discovered in January, and now the pneumonia - from which I've recovered temporarily (they say it is a particularly stubborn strain) - my life span has considerably shortened, and may, at the most, last only another year.

Consequently, I have embarked on a major campaign to "put my house in order" - those who know me know that I am anally retentive, and have, over the years, collected all sorts of random documents relating to the CNMI, to the environment, to other of my interests. Unfortunately, like the shoemaker's children who has no shoes, most of this librarian's documents are not very well organized.

The chore of sorting through them all, and disposing of them, is only beginning, but one of the items I just came across stands out so clearly that I could not resist sharing it. It is the governor's April 21, 2006, State of the Commonwealth Address. This one, it might be remembered, came with visuals.

I will leave the "What we found on Jan.9," "What we have already done," "What we are now doing" parts of his speech untouched, and focus on the "What I propose to do this year" part. It is now 2009, and one would expect that if what was proposed was actually done, the evidence of it would be plain to see.

The first thing the governor said he would do during the remainder of the year was a desk audit. "I have instructed the Office of Personnel Management to obtain an independent and comprehensive desk audit of all positions in the Commonwealth. Doing this kind of "bottom up" analysis is the only fair way to assess the needs of the Commonwealth in future years in terms of number and classification of jobs and the appropriate salary levels."

Next, he said, "We will be asking the Legislature for authority to undertake very tough measures to reduce the projected annual deficit for this year, which is currently estimated to be \$37.5 million. We need to get the annual deficit down to as near zero as humanly possible so we don't add to the burden of our overall cumulative deficit."

Next, "We will seek to reverse the CUC utility reserve fund. As the Lt. Governor reported, within 60 days the general fund will not be burdened with paying for CUC's fuel costs."

"We will seek legislation to effect an employer contribution holiday for the general fund only. The general fund is the guarantor of the retirement fund and remains obligated to repay those funds. **Having this holiday will not affect the benefits of the retirees in any way. They are covered. They will get 100% of their benefits.**" (emphasis added)

"We will reprogram the fiscal year 2006 deficit reserve to address the current year

shortfall."

"Wage reductions are at the end of my list. The wage reduction legislation pending in the Legislature is intended to be a temporary measure to help the Commonwealth survive this current crisis. I recommend that the legislature make clear that its provisions will expire at the end of the fiscal year. I cannot reduce the deficit sufficiently if we do not take this step."

"We will present a balanced budget by May 1...."

"We will support the private sector in building the economy. We do not intend to ask more from the private sector by raising business taxes. More sales will lead to more taxes. Not more taxes on sales."

There's more - about working with the private sector, using special advisors for different foreign markets, trying to find alternate fuel sources for airlines, implementing zoning in Garapan and throughout the island, the promise of Tinian's gaming industry, of a growing education industry. the promising military contribution.....

I'm not sure I understand what is meant by the promise to reprogram the FY'06 deficit reserve, or to reverse the CUC utility reserve fund. What it sounds like is that back-ups and reserves intended for other things are being wiped out. In which case, one can assume that those promises have been kept. As has the promise to "effect an employer contribution holiday" in regard to Retirement Fund payments. (Don't you just love the euphemism? A holiday????)

But where's the desk audit - the most important ingredient in making sure government is working efficiently, or effectively, or economically? Where are the wage reductions? Where are the "tough" measures to reduce the deficit? Where is the protection for the retirees?

Though business taxes may not have been raised, fees and other service charges that businesses must pay certainly have been, in several areas. The increased fees may not be called sales taxes, but they do constitute increased costs businesses must pay in order to stay in business.

I'm sure there are other such documents around, spelling out politician promises that then are never kept. This one appeared quite serendipitously - and seemed just too appropriate to ignore.....

The *Saipan Tribune* reported on Thursday that the Legislature is apparently blocking CUC from hiring the 16 technicians it has repeatedly said it will need if CUC is to keep its generators maintained and operating once the Aggreko contract ends. I happen to have a strong personal interest in this situation - I am now required to be on oxygen - from an electrically-powered concentrator - 24/7. I am scared to death of what will happen if Saipan goes back on the rolling blackouts it had before the Aggreko generators

went on-line. Installing a generator is not practical in my situation. Medicare provides a canister of back-up oxygen that only lasts four hours - and limits that to one a month.

I've been told there are about 100 other persons on island using concentrators. Some of them may have generators. But many may not - there is no data on this. So what are we to do if rolling blackouts resume? All go sit in at the hospital and use CHC's oxygen - and space and beds and other facilities? What about those who need dialysis?

The refusal, to date, of the members of the legislature to go ahead and authorize CUC to hire qualified foreign workers to keep its generators in operating condition, and to keep them working, is incomprehensible. Neither politics nor local hiring preferences should play any role in such life-threatening situations.

Short takes:

On the subject of not increasing taxes, it's too bad no one spoke up when the regulations for additional fees and costs for foreign students were first proposed. Now the regulations are in place, creating hardships for both the students (and their families) and the schools that serve them. Talk about supporting the private sector, establishing niche markets!!! Here was a good "industry" - not damaging to the environment, not threatening to the morals of the community - beginning to grow, and bring in extra revenue, yet it's being taxed out of existence by short-sighted, greedy legislators who don't seem able to understand the long-range consequences of their actions. A pity indeed!

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Now that the Republican party open primary has been completed, what significance does it have? It did eliminate one candidate from the November ballot, but was it really the less popular one? Can one assume that no one voted for the weaker candidate so that his/her candidate could look stronger - as is suspected many people do when open primaries are held? Can it be seen as a straw ballot - when only some of the electorate voted? I, for one, did not vote. It just didn't make sense to me....

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The new *Commonwealth Register* is out. Interestingly enough, there is no executive order declaring an emergency for CUC. Seems it's been issued separately. Why is that? So fewer can read what it says? Or? There is the to-be-expected emergency declaration for Anatahan. There are also emergency regulations proposed regarding Child Care Development Funds, apparently to meet a federal requirement. The only new ones being proposed concern the regulation of real property appraisers. Two sets of regulations have been certified as adopted, one dealing with DEQ matters and the other with the Department of Labor.