

On My Mind

7/31/09

Two weeks ago, I wrote, "One supposes the Zoning Board should be commended for choosing to address the issue of use of that area [Tanapag's beach front] on a broader scale. Hopefully it will settle the question once and for all: Tanapag's beach front, vital to preservation of the community, should remain permanently closed to commercial development."

I take back my commendation, tentative as it was. Today I learned that the Zoning Board is conducting a survey among Tanapag residents that starts off with "By rezoning the Village Center from Village Residential to Village Commercial there would be more opportunity for businesses to open in the area around the cathedral and beach side." The Tanapag church is a cathedral? Not hardly! A diocese has only one cathedral, and Saipan's is located in Susupe. You'd think the Zoning Board would know that.

Moreover, since when did anyone agree that the Village Center - whatever that is - was going to be rezoned from residential to commercial in the first place?

Then the survey says, "Please tell us what you think about allowing the following businesses to operate in your village" and proceeds to list everything from gas stations and retail sales stores to bed and breakfasts and drive-through restaurants.

Excuse me? How about finding out, first, whether anyone is even interested in changing the status quo? How about explaining what a "Village Center" is? How about explaining why Tanapag should even consider establishing such a "village center"? How about explaining why the smallest village on Saipan (a Pacific island, need I mention) should be the first one targeted for what is, after all, such a Western, European, concept?

A single struggling businessman wants a variance from residential zoning - a businessman who built his nightclub/restaurant without obtaining building code approval either - and suddenly, the whole zoning code for the area is going to be re-examined? Why? Who's complaining? What's the purpose?

The rumor is that whoever loaned this businessman money wants it back, and therefore wants the businessman to succeed. That, however, is not Tanapag villagers' responsibility. They should not be asked to sacrifice their life style, their peace and quiet, for someone else's hoped-for gain.

The new Zoning Board administrator has been on the job for perhaps a month. He came with glowing recommendations. And it is true that one of his first official acts - to defer implementation of the decision to move all "adult businesses" to Middle Road because it is unworkable - was a good one. But imposing pre-conceived notions on local residents is quite something else.

He might better step back a little, take the time to learn about the island and its people and their ways, before attempting to promote his ideas of what the island and its villages should be like.

The only remaining "wilderness" area on Saipan, an area left undisturbed for 30 years or more, is about to be destroyed. A dirt road used to go through there - rarely travelled because there weren't many people or all that many cars on island at the time. In the 1970's, two bridges along the road collapsed, adding to the area's isolation.

At some point, someone who's probably left island long since drew up plans to re-construct the road. As is typical here, they were promptly shelved. Now those plans have been dusted off, and steps are being taken to put them into effect - to re-build the small dirt road into a paved highway. The reason behind this move is not at all clear - except that federal money is involved, and theoretically, it would be good for the economy to spend it.

The road would connect what is now the Kingfisher Golf course with Bird Island lookout. The U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration has prepared a Draft Environmental Assessment, and announced, just last week, that the EA is "available" for comment. The comment period closes on August 19, 2009.

Though (re)construction of the road might have been justified at the height of the tourism bubble, in today's economy that justification no longer has merit. The demand simply is not there.

The proposed road would cut through an area that, undisturbed since the 1970's, has allowed a proliferation of wildlife and natural growth, and a depth of species and numbers of both flora and fauna not seen to any significant extent in any other part of Saipan, or in the other two populated islands, for that matter. Functioning as a natural wildlife sanctuary, the area feeds and supports the rest of the islands in maintaining their natural populations throughout. Properly managed, it could also offer any number of eco-tourism-type trails and hikes to tourists seeking something different from Guam's urban setting, thus strengthening a CNMI market niche of pastoral "R&R."

However, if the road is built, all this would disappear, disrupting and destroying natural habitat just by virtue of the construction process itself, and continuing to decimate the populations of flora and fauna by the fact that the entire area would suddenly become easily accessible to locals as well as tourists, and thereby prone to development - not to mention predation, vandalism, general degradation - just the opposite of what the area now offers.

The area's function as a sanctuary contributes to the natural welfare of the island and its people, it supports the island's focus on environmental responsibility, it is ecologically meaningful. The area's destruction by the re-construction of an intrusive road would cause tremendous damage and accomplish very little.

The area also contains numerous significant archaeological sites which are now thankfully protected by their relative inaccessibility in that remote area of the island. Were the road to be built, those archaeological sites would soon be discovered, pillaged, defaced and destroyed. Not only are the sites considered sacred but they are also extremely important sources of information about the history and culture of the people of the CNMI. There is no way they can all be protected and preserved once the road is put

through. Those sites will be desecrated, and lost.

The Hawaii Division, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, would do well to reconsider its intent to re-construct a highway that has been defunct for many years, that no longer serves the purpose it was once intended for, and that would cause tremendous ecological and archaeological damage to the entire area. Surely better uses can be found for the funds involved.

I would urge concerned readers to join me in registering their protests. Perhaps a public hearing should also be asked for?

A copy of the Draft EA can be obtained by contacting Ms. Richelle Takara, Federal Highway Administration, Hawaii Division, Boxd 50206, 300 Ala Moana Blvd, Rm 3-306, Honolulu, HI 96850. Further information is available from Ms. Takara by phone at 808-54-2700, ext 2311, by e-mail at < Richelle.Takara@dot.gov > or by mail at the above address.

(If you've already read this in the paper, my apologies. I do not know the extent of overlap between readers of the column and readers of the local newspapers.....)

The new *Commonwealth Register* is out. Once again, the emergency declaration for CUC is not there. Apparently, it was issued as a separate executive order. As I asked the last time, Why is that? So fewer can read what it says? Or? At least this one, according to the *Saipan Tribune*, suspends the restrictions on CUC's hiring foreign workers, making possible the long-delayed hiring of technicians, engineers, and others who will be critical to proper operation of the power plant once Aggreko leaves. Surely there was no collusion in the legislature's sitting on its hands so the governor could take credit for doing so?

Included in the *Register* are the to-be-expected emergency declaration for Anatahan, emergency regs which amend the foreign student visa regulations, emergency regs adopting policies and procedures for the Homeownership Investment Partnership Program, and proposed regs regarding amended pay differentials for PSS and for Head Start.