

On My Mind
8/28/09

According to the 8/26 issue of the *Marianas Variety*, the very same medical service that was sued earlier this year for not paying its rent, and was shut down last year for violating sanitation rules and faking laboratory test results, has now been awarded space in the CNMI government Commonwealth Health Center complex for operation of its own private clinic.

Island Medical Center has agreed to serve patients under "CHC's medically indigent program" at no charge to the patients, with the cost to CHC and the CNMI government being used to off-set its rental of the premises, which has been set at "more than \$51,000" annually, according to the report in the paper.

Renting space to medical clinics may be a creative way to use some of the apparently over-built space at CHC, but it doesn't seem very prudent to choose as tenant someone who has an unreliable - and somewhat tainted - record as both tenant and clinic.

Nor does it seem fair to the indigent patients to hand them off to a medical service of seemingly questionable quality.

In addition, having the government serve as landlord deprives the private sector of the income from the clinic's rental payments that would otherwise circulate in the economy.

Despite the several opportunities for public input at hearings of one sort or another recently, reports say that the hearings were only sparsely attended - few members of the public showed up. That is a great pity, because if the public does not speak out about its interests and concerns, the policy decisions involved will be left up to bureaucrats and politicians - and we all know that quite often their interests are quite different from those of the general public.

So why isn't the public showing up? And what can be done about it? In the first place, the hearings are often announced only a few times, in only one of the newspapers. Not everyone reads both local newspapers, or reads them closely, or reads them every day. More avenues need to be found to get the information out that there will be a hearing. Even an on-line calendar - long advocated by yours truly - would only reach those who have internet access.

Not a listener of local radio or tv stations, I have no idea whether any of them air notices of public meetings. If they don't, they should. Maybe, if the subject of the hearing is substantive enough, posters and flyers - even though there is cost involved - should also be tried?

Secondly, hearing notices seldom give a very good explanation of what is really at issue - what the hearing is about. There's no reason why the hearing notices couldn't be more specific. After all, it is unreasonable to expect people to show up if it is not clear what will be discussed. In addition, there almost never is a fuller explanation - the back-

ground, whys and wherefores - which could and should be provided in press releases sent to the newspapers as well as radio and tv stations. While most hearing notices provide a phone number "for more information," that places the burden on the inquirer. Actually, it is the one calling for the hearing who should rightfully bear the burden of getting that information out to the public.

It's possible that taking such steps might not solve the problem of public attendance at hearings, but at the very least, agency rules should require them in the interests of keeping the public informed.

Looks like some candidates are doing their best to make the mayoral race a single-issue debate over the disposal of animals killed on the roads, and the lack of a dog shelter. In the first place, I thought the solution to the disposal problem (described not too long ago in what I thought was a letter to the editor though I have been unable to re-find it) - that the animal be moved off the road, be incised so as to allow gas to escape and then covered with dirt to decompose naturally - perhaps cold-hearted, but nonetheless, almost elegant - both inexpensive and practical.

As far as the dog shelter goes - and how come nobody is mentioning cat shelters???? - the real problem is not the funding, but the lack of will, and the lack of common sense. It doesn't take elaborate plans, or an elaborate structure - and the thousands of dollars they imply - to build a workable, safe, sanitary shelter for stray animals.

But the mayor's programs and responsibilities go far beyond stray dogs. And the debate should focus on what those are, how well they are being performed now, and what prospective candidates can offer that would be comparable, or better.

Short takes:

We would like to extend a big welcome to Abe Malae, recently appointed assistant executive director for operations at CUC. Malae served as chief executive officer of the American Samoa Power Authority for twenty years, during which time he developed and implemented model policies and practices for the local work force that, applied here, could turn CNMI's power plant operation into the same smoothly-working, efficient system American Samoa enjoyed under his leadership. Let us hope that Malae, who left his most recent position as a Senator in American Samoa to take on the CUC job, is given sufficient help and support to work his magic here!

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According to my brother, a retired patent attorney who is visiting me at the moment, in Great Britain when bids are issued by the government, it is neither the highest nor the lowest bidder that is then selected for the job, but the one in the middle. As my brother puts it so succinctly, "Would you like to be launched into space on a craft built by the lowest bidder?" How's that for some food for thought?

I was heartened to read, in yesterday's *Marianas Variety* the report of plans by San Antonio parish pastoral council president Herbert Del Rosario to organize parish councils for the purpose of strengthening family value programs and addressing domestic violence and other problems. Apparently the move started with the Tanapag parish council, which recently conducted a prayer rally against illegal drugs and gambling. Though not a Catholic, I believe in the strength and power of the Church. It often can reach out far more effectively than lay efforts can. What with Del Rosario's well-known leadership capabilities, the proposed parish council organization offers real promise, and we wish it well.

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Going from the sublime to the ridiculous: those five-star reviews that amazon.com features on ostensible best-sellers - and which I've relied on to make my own purchases - lost all their glitter last week, when I came across incontrovertible proof that the stars are - at least some of the time - based on comments submitted by friends of the author, rather than knowledgeable readers. What a pity! It was a good idea.....

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Rumor once had it that the NMC Board of Regents was giving the NMC President a free hand because members of the Board were afraid that family relatives who were NMC employees would otherwise lose their jobs. Given the continuing turn-over of staff and faculty, one wonders if that is still true....

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A letter in today's *Saipan Tribune* complained about poor service from one of the private water companies on island. Tony Pellegrino's Saipan Ice and Water offered me a totally different experience. I complained to the person who delivered my water bottles earlier this week that the Saipan Ice water from my dispenser looked tainted. He took it with him, and within an hour, two other employees from Saipan Ice came to my house to investigate. They were polite, solicitous, informed. After exploring several possibilities - could the minerals not in the distilled water, with which I compared the Saipan Ice water, be making the difference? - they settled on the recently purchased bargain-basement pump as the likely culprit, and showed me where the interior spring showed signs of corrosion. Sure enough, when I replaced the pump with one of better quality, Saipan Ice's water was just as clear as that of the distilled water. Truly commendable service!