

On My Mind
1/15/10

I believe it was former *PDN* editor Joe Murphy who coined the phrase, "only on Guam," or OOG, to describe incidents sufficiently outside the norm to warrant being given the distinction of the label "OOG." Whatever the CNMI equivalent is, or might be - only on Saipan? only in the CNMI? - today's headlines in both local papers certainly warrant the label. Only here would a governor remove a prisoner from federal custody - without permission, no less - to serve his own personal needs.

For those who don't have access to the local papers, Governor Fitial - without clearance from federal officials - had the head of the CNMI Department of Corrections bring a Chinese woman who was in federal custody to his house to give him a massage. The woman had been arrested last week for attempted smuggling of illegal aliens into Guam, and was being held in prison without bail.

It will be interesting to see what the fall-out is, if any. If it's a slow news day for the rest of the world, it could get pretty wide-spread coverage, once again besmirching the reputation of the CNMI.

The governor, lieutenant governor, mayors, and new members of the legislature, board of education and municipal councils were sworn into office earlier this week for terms that, in each case, include an unprecedented extra year. Thinking ahead is not all that well-developed a trait in the CNMI, so it came as no surprise that none of the newly elected officials offered any thoughts on what they might do, could hope to accomplish, with that extra year in office.

It probably is most meaningful, offers the most potential, to members of the House, who now will have an extra year before having to once again think about re-election. There would be time to assess how well the House rules are working, whether the Legislative Bureau is performing as first anticipated, which laws already passed need revision or deletion, could be consolidated with others, are lacking in enforcement and/or need strengthening. There'd be more time for individual members to become more familiar with the concerns of their constituents. Of course, much the same could be said for members of the Senate.....

It might also provide an opportunity to re-examine party structures, beliefs, alignments. At present, the CNMI's political parties seem more defined by who are members rather than what each party stands for. That makes for rather unstable politics. As was very noticeable in this last election, party affiliations were nearly as meaningless as hair color. Changing affiliations was easy, and many candidates did not hesitate to do so.

Another issue legislators might consider addressing, particularly now that they have more time, is their own qualification for their positions, and the need, perhaps, to obtain more in the way of preparation than the "freshman orientation" provided by the judicial branch - which is excellent so far as it goes, but covers only part of the legislative

responsibility. There is a need for briefing from various agencies of the executive branch and other government agencies as well: on all aspects of the infrastructure (roads, power, water, etc.), retirement plans, marine conservation, health care, budget preparation, and global warming, to name just a few.

Legislators could mandate that "freshman orientation" be expanded to include review and discussion of any or all of the above, and more.

Legislators might also want to look at the value of participating in the National Council of State Legislatures, which provides extensive help on all matters relating to the conduct of legislative sessions, procedural as well as substantive. A member of the legislature who undertook to attend NCLS programs - without support from the CNMI - refers often to the invaluable experience and information to be gained by such an affiliation.

It would be a pity if that extra year, given to elected officials by the recently passed Constitutional amendment that requires CNMI elections to be held the same year as federal elections, were totally wasted!

Has anyone noticed Microl Toyota's seemingly nearly empty car lot? Surprising as it may seem, it is not due to a slow-down in business, but to a jump in sales! Toyota has issued a "recall" - though not advertised as such - on Toyota Tacoma models for 1995-2000 on such generous terms that most people are turning around to buy new Toyotas. According to Doug Brennan, general manager and vice-president of Microl Corporation, the "recalled" Tacomas, covered by a 15-year warranty, were sold with sub-standard chassis. Those found with rust perforations through the frame, and still in good condition will be "bought back" by Microl at 1.5 times Kelly Blue Book retail value, he said.

Tacoma owners have the option of keeping their trucks or turning them in. Many are turning them in, and using the buy-back to buy new cars - of which a lot are Toyotas!

Has anyone wondered about the "stepping stones" that are being laid all around the Commonwealth Health Center? Well, they're not for erosion control, as I first thought they were. Rather, according to Secretary of Public Health J. Kevin Villagomez, "they are the foundation for a security fence that is a US Dept of Homeland Security requirement and they are funding it." He explained that, "Because CHC is the only inpatient facility in the CNMI, we need to ensure the ability for total lock down during acts of terrorism in the US or here locally. For us to get other federal funds to "harden" the facility (CHC) we needed to show that the facility can be totally secured. For example, because of the fencing project, we were able to get a make-shift portable trauma center that can convert the lower parking lot of CHC into a 38-bed trauma center should the

need arise. Presently we only have 8 trauma beds at CHC."

The project isn't finished yet, but it doesn't look like the fence that will apparently be put in would be high enough to deter even agile children. However, we will wait and see.....

Word games and other anomalies: The *Saipan Tribune* ran a story that said the governor approved \$7.6 million in CUC projects, even though only \$3.2 million are available....Jaime Vergara introduced a new word in the same 1/11 issue : "ecozoic" meaning "think Universe, act Earth."...Governor Fitial's word use is probably a mistake, but it is unclear whether it is the reporter's or the governor's: he is reported to have said, in talking to Assistant Secretary for the U.S. Department of Interior, according to today's *Marianas Variety*, "Effective communication involves emphatic listening, so I will be very emphatic to you when you talk." Could he have meant "empathic"?...I like Zaldy Dandan's description, in his "Variations" column in today's *Variety*, of lawmakers' approach toward legislation: "pass it now, read it later, amend it soon, enforce it not." ... The same paper had a story about a possible Saturday evening flea market in its 1/13 issue, but neglected to mention where it would be located, and in the same issue, a story about the release of the man who'd vandalized six cars in San Jose that did not make clear why he was released....The zoning board is to be complimented on its web page, at <http://www.zoning.gov.mp/> . It is current, easy to use, and looks pretty complete - with the exception of three blind headings under publications: those for Job Announcement: Zoning Enforcement Officer, Proposed Rezones, and Zoning Administrator Recruitment.

Some upcoming events of note:

January 17, Sunday, 3:00 p.m., Mt. Carmel Cathedral: Thanksgiving Mass in honor of Chalan Kanoa Diocese and Bishop Tomas A. Camacho's silver anniversaries;

January 18th, Monday, 1:00 p.m., Martin Luther King Day, and a government holiday: Annual Commemoration Day program 1:00 p.m., American Memorial Park theater;

January 19th, Tuesday, 6:00 p.m., first in series of the Humanities Council Book Discussion Programs with Professor P.F. Kluge, American Memorial Park theater;

January 22, Friday, 3:00 p.m., Beautify CNMI! (re)organizational meeting, DEQ Conference room;

January 26, Tuesday, 5:00 p.m., Cancer Survivors' Meeting, Chamolinian Room, Hyatt Regency.

Last but not least, kudos to teacher Rebekah Yost and Whispering Palms School for putting together a plan to protect and preserve one of Saipan's neglected historic landmarks that has seen numerous attempts at refurbishment, none of them very long-lasting, the light house on Navy Hill. The Department of Public Lands has approved the project to

paint, landscape and create a mural, but only for a year. Let's hope Yost, Whispering Palms, DPL, and the students' support and enthusiasm will go far beyond just one year.