

On My Mind

2/5/10

Almost forever, it seems, people have been complaining about the Commonwealth Health Center and its lack of personnel, supplies, equipment and everything else needed to run an effective hospital, predicting dire outcomes for anyone going there for treatment - with help coming only from the occasional donor, such as the hospital volunteers' association.

Now there is promise of more significant improvement - on some fronts, anyway. Former House member and now Senator Ralph DLG Torres, and Representative Sylvestre I. Iguel, chairs of the Senate and House Committees on Health, Education and Welfare, respectively, met with Secretary of Health Joseph Kevin Villagomez recently to discuss replacing the hospital's much-maligned and admittedly out-dated CT scanner.

According to Villagomez, out of that discussion came a promise on the part of the two Congressmen to work with the local delegation on appropriating funds toward the purchase of a new one. In an e-mail, Villagomez said that he will be working with the Department of Interior to get matching funds to purchase either a 32- or 64-slice scanner, which is projected to cost about \$1 million. The new equipment would not only give a clearer image and thus a more accurate diagnosis but would also decrease the need to refer patients off-island for radiological studies. He said the two also promised to work on obtaining funds to replace 60 hospital beds that are over ten years old.

Villagomez also reported that CHC is starting to get some military surplus equipment from the Guam Naval Hospital. "So far the equipments are the smaller medical equipments but we will be discussing with them some of our needs for the bigger ticketed items," he said. "We also discussed these needs with Assistant Secretary Tony Babauta and OIA Director Nic Pula during their recent visit to the CNMI. We gave them a list of equipment that needs to be upgraded or replaced and we will be working with their office to identify some funds. In addition, the military medical surplus site in San Diego is being looked into as a possible site for us to request [for] some of the medical equipments from other military hospitals that are closing down throughout the US or abroad."

He said he is hopeful that some of the needed medical equipment would be installed at CHC within this year.

Also almost forever, it seems, former governor and now House speaker Froilan C. Tenorio has insisted, and keeps insisting, that only casino gambling on Saipan will save its economy - despite the failure of two past attempts, in 1979 and 2007, to bring casino gambling to Saipan. Apparently, hope springs eternal. As do, one might observe, off-island interests in promoting gambling in the CNMI - be it on Saipan or Rota or Tinian.

In one of the clearest examples of why the composition of the CNMI Senate - with equal representation of all three populated islands - could be beneficial to the whole

CNMI, and how the islands/their delegations could work together for mutual benefit, Tinian and Rota, in the interests of protecting their own casino development, are both objecting to the introduction of casino gambling on Saipan. Which, in this case, is very fortunate for Saipan - or at least, those on Saipan who are opposed to casino gambling.

Here, it is a matter of self-interest for Rota and Tinian. But wouldn't it be nice if the leaders of all three delegations would work together and draw up a scenario in which Saipan, rather than competing by establishing yet another casino, could improve the picture? What if Saipan were designated to fill a different but complementary niche in the over-all economy/tourism design? Saipan could - and does - provide the bulk of shopping opportunity. It provides most of the historic sites. It has large nature preserves. It has more golf course, more sports offerings. It is the most metropolitan - in terms of potential cultural activities, business development, other urban pastimes.

The CNMI could be sold as an integrated whole - where one went to the "outer islands" primarily to gamble, with, on Rota, the added attraction of its garden beauty, on Tinian, of its historic North Field, and came to Saipan either to partake of its commercial offerings or to go trekking in its larger expanses of undeveloped "boonies." That would require better transportation among the three islands, but that is not an insuperable goal, and would surely provide more benefit, in the long run, for all three islands.

The bottom line, of course, is whether the monied interests backing casino gambling on Saipan could be persuaded to back something more benign, more in keeping with today's climate of caring for the welfare not only of the environment but also the people who inhabit it, and if they can't, whether other monied interests could be found who would do so. Seems it would be the right thing to do.

On the subject of "the right thing to do..." Michael Earnest, the Attorney General's Consumer Counsel, gave local businesses quite a lecture at this past week's meeting of the Saipan Chamber of Commerce, high-lighting the provisions of several laws that provide consumer protection, describing penalties for failure to follow those laws, and warning of renewed enforcement efforts from his office. Being a monopoly is not necessarily bad, but acting like one is bad, he warned Chamber members.

Earnest explained that his office has now been assigned a full-time investigator, and with more attorneys hired at the AG's office, he himself will now be able to focus on his assigned role. We are putting the community on notice, he said. Initially, their main target will be expired foods and medicines, especially those intended for infants and the man'amko. Earnest said they would not drive out to Kagman to investigate a complaint of stale potato chips, for example, but would certainly do so if the complaint dealt with outdated milk or medicines. He noted that the CNMI is the only jurisdiction in the U.S. allowed to sell outdated foodstuffs, but under the law they must be located separately from still-fresh foods, and must be sold at half price.

Another provision: prices for all goods must be conspicuous - not necessarily on the item itself, but located "somewhere between the item and the cash register," Earnest said. Some stores are much better at this than others, one might note.....

It would be unrealistic to expect all transgressions to disappear overnight; nonetheless, consumers wishing to report violations are encouraged to call his office at 664-2333.

Short takes:

With the Accreditation Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges making an unplanned if not unprecedented trip to the CNMI to check up on the status of Northern Marianas College, one is forced to ask: didn't anyone check out the Guam credentials of NMC's now-suspended president before she was hired? The coconut wireless has, from the beginning, carried tales of her poor record on Guam. On the assumptions that (a) part of WASC's concern relates to the conduct of the former president and (b) there is some truth to the tales on the wireless, why weren't those concerns taken into account? Why would anyone want to sabotage NMC that way?

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Could it be that the governor has turned over all the photo opportunities that have to do with designating certain days or weeks as special for one reason or another to the lieutenant governor because he is trying to avoid media exposure? Like in the alleged Harry Truman quote, "When it gets too hot for me I'll get out of the kitchen"?

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(Local) news reports to the contrary notwithstanding, President Barack Obama's visit to Guam scheduled for some time in March will NOT mark the occasion of "the first sitting United States president to visit the Marianas, which consists of Guam and the CNMI." According to the 2/02/10 issue of the *Pacific Daily News*, five previous presidents have visited Guam: Dwight D. Eisenhower (who had been elected but not yet sworn in) in December of 1952, Lyndon B. Johnson on March 20, 1967, Richard Nixon in June 1969, Ronald Reagan on April 24, 1984 and April 29, 1986, and Bill Clinton on November 24, 1998.

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We are heartened by the news coming from the Saipan Mayor's office - from his vow to cut overseas travel to his promise to establish a task force pledged to develop tourist sites, to his statement that he will take over the stray dog control program. Worthy sentiments. Let's hope they all materialize!