

On My Mind  
2/12/10

When people speak, in dismay and disgust, of the extent of graft, corruption, nepotism, and other crimes in the CNMI, the customary response is that such crimes exist to the same extent in political circles everywhere, but that in such a small place as this, they are simply more obvious. It would seem only logical, given the size, to expect that it would be all the easier to control such crimes, because there would be no place to hide.

One would think put-upon citizens would join together, and insist that justice be done, that contracts be fairly awarded, that jobs be given to the qualified, that work be properly done, performed in a timely manner. Knowing the failures, the discrepancies, the unearned give-aways, and knowing the "perpetrators," an abused public should hardly find it that difficult to stop illegal practices, and install a more responsible, accountable, government.

But that does not seem to be how it works. Everyone may know who is doing what to whom, but doing something about it, cleaning up such a morally bankrupt government, isn't possible - just because the place is so small, and everyone is inter-related, every one is inter-dependent, and no one wants to initiate action against his/her relatives.

Yet inaction isn't the answer either. The governor's on-going retaliation campaign - against the *Marianas Variety*, for example, is undermining, destructive. The coconut wireless has it that the governor is trying to force tenants out of the JoeTen Dandan building, trying to force proven capable division and department heads out of office. The sanctions being imposed could eventually affect the entire island economy, as people lose jobs, families lose homes, less money circulates, and government services go into further decline.

To think of such conditions continuing - getting worse - over the next five years is deeply disturbing, to put it mildly.

There's been talk of putting together a "watchdog" organization that would monitor and report out such transgressions. If enough information is gathered, enough people are "inconvenienced," enough injustice is imposed, a "tipping point" might well be reached that would finally persuade people that enough is enough, that would give people the courage to do what is needed to bring about reform.

The tragedy is in the time, the talents, the opportunities that will all have been lost if the occurrence of the tipping point is delayed too long.

\*\*\*

The Northern Marianas Housing Corporation has asked the public to comment on a proposal that would rebuild and rehabilitate the Chalan Kanoa round house and surrounding area and would provide concession stands for vendors to sell locally-made products, at a cost of \$400,000. The notice appeared on page 5 of the 2/8 issue of the *Marianas Variety*; deadline for comments is 2/24/10.

Among the eligible activities listed on the Community Development Block Grant for Insular Areas web page are: rehabilitation of houses and landmark structures; and assistance to private, for profit entities to carry out economic development activities (including assistance to micro enterprises). Rehabilitation of the CK round house and provision of stalls for the sale of locally-made projects would seem an appropriate fit.

Being neither an engineer nor a mathematician, I don't know how far \$400,000 would go if applied elsewhere, differently. However, given the general state of the CK residential area, including the shortage of water, the fragility of the power system, the pot-holed roads, one can't help wondering whether it wouldn't be of benefit to more people if the money were spent on essential infrastructure, rather than on what has been proposed.

After all, all it takes is so-called "sweat equity" - happy labor - to clean up the area, plant shrubs and trees, clean and re-paint the round house, put up tents for vendors to sell their wares. Wouldn't the hard cash - not all that easy to come by - be better used to do things sweat equity cannot - like repair and replace water lines, power meters, power poles and the like?

The proposal was introduced by the Saipan Municipal Council. Maybe there should be a public hearing to allow the community to discuss the allocation of funds?

\*\*\*

Though there have been repeated warnings to the public about the internet scams that steal people's credit card info, raid their bank accounts, and otherwise deceive people into foolhardy spending, the scams are still there, and people are still losing money. A new notice from the CNMI Attorney General's office warns that at this time of year, one of the "tricks" being used by scammers is to imitate an Internal Revenue Service form on the web, asking for personal information that (a) the IRS does not require, and (b) that would allow the scammer to charge items against the person's credit card.

Another dangerous e-mail scam is the one that uses a friend's name and claims that the friend desperately needs money to get him/herself out of some unlikely dilemma or other (I was called home to Virginia but forgot my wallet....)

Then there are the scams that tell people they've won huge amounts of money, and all that is necessary to claim it is to send in all sorts of personal information as well as "token" amounts of money needed to process the claim.

Warns the AG: "Don't click [on the IRS form], do not enter your personal information. This is [these are] an attempt to steal your identity and money."

In short, be suspicious, be skeptical, and be careful! And remember, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true.....

\*\*\*

Short takes:

The governor's latest scheme to save the economy - this time by "hosting" some

4,000 Marines - is about as wild as it gets. Guam - four times the size of Saipan and with three times its population - is balking at taking in 8,000 military. It sees endless problems from demands on infrastructure and a limited water supply to environmental degradation and noise pollution. Even if all 14 of the CNMI's islands were included, the numbers would still make the proposal unrealistic. This is leadership?

\*

The ever-active coconut wireless has it that the latest scheme for "reviving" La Fiesta mall is to turn the place into one big brothel - gathering all the massage parlors and the like and putting them into a single red-light district for all of Saipan. Since it's impossible to rid the island of whoredom altogether, that doesn't seem such a bad idea - so long as the trade is regulated, and strict health controls are in place. It's been done in other places. Why not here? Doing so would generate income, get the night gals out of Garapan, and save the AG's office and the police a lot of time and money.

\*

A'propos the many buffet offerings available on island: though some now advertise and indeed offer, more and better nutritional value, nonetheless, the ubiquity of buffets strikes me as counter-intuitive. Rather than encouraging people to eat reasonably-sized portions, and reasonable amounts - which today's health gurus would have you do - buffet offerings do the exact opposite: demand that one fill one's plate, again and again - not only because the food is there, but also because it's the only way to feel one is getting one's money's worth. Beware the buffet!

\*

A long overdue acknowledgment to Dan Camacho and saipan.com, for continuing, over the years, to host this column on the web, updating its copyright notice annually, and fixing a variety of snags that occasionally surface. A thousand thanks, Dan! Thanks, too, to Pete Perez, for doing the same on <[www.chamorro.com](http://www.chamorro.com)>.

\*

Saipan has finally made it into the big time - its phone numbers are on the list used by the national Democratic Party to raise campaign funds. Now if only it worked the other way, and all the 800 numbers out there could be called by the CNMI!

\*

Latest local imagery of speech: "we will lawn the yard...."

\*

Best kept secret: February is the CNMI's loveliest month- cool, dry, mostly sunny.