

On My Mind
3/12/10

The Division of Parks and Grounds needs help. It no longer has the manpower or the equipment to keep the Marpi path clear of leaves and debris, and as a result, that [multi?]-million-dollar investment is going to waste. The attractively landscaped path begins at the Last Command Post and wends its way some 3+ miles up and around the hills all the way to Suicide Cliff.

At present, those who use the path - whether for aerobic exercise, stationary exercise, or merely to admire the flowering shrubs and trees planted along the way - risk twisted if not broken ankles from the branches, rocks and slick mulch now on the path, and are forced to walk on the road, which presents its own risk of their being hit by the bikes, busses and cars going up and down the hill.

Ordinarily Division personnel keep the path clear using leaf blowers, but apparently the Division is short of staff, so much debris has built up that the leaf blowers can no longer do the job anyway, and it lacks the heavier equipment that would be needed to do the sweeping.

Particularly in the present tight economy, it is no longer realistic to depend on government to fix such problems. People will have to begin to take things into their own hands - as indeed is happening at schools where parents volunteer to do preventive maintenance, at the JoeTen-Kiyu library where a volunteer group is now maintaining the grounds. A likely volunteer group might be the Hash House Harriers, who often run in the Marpi area. Or perhaps Beautify CNMI! could take on the challenge of cleaning the path on a regular basis. Or a Friends of the Marpi path could form, and take a Saturday to do the job. The path could be divided up, with smaller groups each taking a portion of it as their regular assignment. Maybe the Division would be willing to erect signs, as is done on major highways on the mainland: "this section of the Marpi Path maintained by [name of group]." Call Division Director Tony Benavente at 234-7405/1791 if you can help.

A path problem that volunteers probably cannot fix is the collapse of several of the cement blocks about one-third of the way down from the top (near the two-mile marker). That too presents a safety hazard that should not be allowed to continue.

Granted the path is under-used, but used it is, every day, from early morning til late afternoon, by people of all stripes, colors, ages. It is beautiful, and the greens are relatively well-maintained. But the path itself has been allowed to fall into disrepair, and that is a pity.

Though it might take some additional effort, the temporary shut down of the Tinian ferry would appear to offer new opportunities to local boat owners. They could offer their services as ferries-on-demand. Or join together - as a co-op? - and set up regularly scheduled runs. Or one individual could set up a company and organize the

small boat owners into a fleet.

After all, dive boats go to Tinian all the time - or they used to, ten years ago when I was still SCUBA diving.

It's a pity that the owners/operators of the Tinian ferry didn't give more warning that their operation was going to shut down, so local substitutes could have been ready to take up the slack right away.

Though at first glance, it seems this opportunity will only exist for the six months that the ferry will not be in service, it's possible that repairs might take longer, or that the Tinian ferry's new schedule might not provide enough trips, in which case, at least some of the "mini-ferries" could stay in business for some time to come. With that in mind, one would hope that the mini-ferries keep their charges at a reasonable level, rather than charging rates so high that no one will want to use them once the larger ferry is back on the scene.

Those who would ban all travel of government employees as an austerity measure are targeting the wrong party. In many instances, off-island travel is exactly what is needed to help the CNMI solve its problems. Many conferences, workshops, training sessions offer new perspectives, new techniques, new information, new tools, new and/or better solutions, that would help government operate more efficiently, effectively, economically. Moreover, the sharing of experience and exposure to innovation that takes place (new uses for old tools, for example) are real benefits that can significantly improve employee production and performance.

To prohibit employees, and thus the CNMI as a whole - from taking advantage of such benefits makes no sense whatsoever.

The problem has to do with which conferences and training sessions are chosen, and who is chosen to attend them. Not all meetings, workshops, etc., are equally worthwhile. And employees who do not attend the sessions or do not have the qualifications to understand the presentations, or are unwilling to share what they've learned, are not appropriate candidates.

In addition, some career paths require continuing education, and while that can occasionally be provided on island, there are other times when it cannot. Prohibiting career advancement only serves to discourage dedicated professionals from even applying for a position in the CNMI.

A more logical approach would be to allot a set number of such workshops, conferences, training sessions to each department - depending on its size and the nature of its "business," so to speak, and let the departments determine what conference, what employee, would bring the most benefit to the employee, the department, the CNMI. Perhaps all off-island travel should be treated this way.....

Short takes:

The latest example of discriminatory practices towards the CNMI: American Express just informed me in a notice dated 2/7/10 that "In a recent review of your account we discovered that Baggage Delay and Loss Protection is not available for residents in your location. Therefore, we are unable to continue your coverage and your enrollment has been terminated as of February 6, 2010." - despite the fact that I have been a member in good standing for some 37 years, and in this same location for the past 28 years! Interestingly enough, I don't think I ever used their policy, never made a claim for baggage delay or loss. But AmeEx decided, anyway, to cancel my coverage - because of my location.

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One unarguably good thing to be said for the 17th Legislature: it's web page, found at <www.cnmileg.gov.mp>. It is comprehensive and very easy to use. The Legislative Bureau started anew, and is still in the process of adding all the laws already passed that were on the old page, but what an improvement! A kudos to the designer! A fast check of the status of Senate bills, however, shows an anomaly: only seven of the 18 bills introduced have been assigned to committees. Date of introduction does not seem to be the issue....

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It's International Women's month. The *Marianas Variety* featured eight women in today's edition in observance thereof. The Indian Parliament has gone a whole lot further: its upper house has passed a bill requiring that one-third of both houses of both its state and national legislatures (called parliaments) be women! The bill is expected to pass the lower house as well, and become law. Wouldn't it be novel if the CNMI did the same. If the U.S. did the same.

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Commonwealth Retirees Association member David M. Sablan reports that to date, of some 6,000 members of the Retirement Fund's retired benefit plan, only 405 have registered with the CRA - a little over 6 percent - of which only 239 provided an email address. Members are urged to register with CRA, so it can serve them better, by sending the following information to <davemsablan@gmail.com>: first, middle and last name; postal and e-mail address; work and home phone number including area code; and status: (a) presently receiving annuity or related benefits from the CNMI Retirement Fund; (b) presently employed by the CNMI government and contributing to the CNMI Retirement Fund; or (c) a surviving spouse of a person who was receiving benefits from the CNMI Retirement Fund.