

On My Mind
4/23/10

It's worse than a roller-coaster. Every day there are new headlines about proposed tax increases, reduced work hours, looming payless holidays, lay-offs, payless paydays. From one day to the next it is not certain who will suffer more, whose paycheck will be cut the most. Instead of only two sides battling about the budget, there are three: the House, the Senate, and the administration. Not one of them supports what either of the others is proposing.

And in the meantime, of course, revenue keeps falling, expenditures keep rising, and the debts keep accumulating.

It's bad enough that political considerations seem to be the dominating factor in the whole thing. But what's worse is that no one seems to have hard figures as to which of the various so-called solutions to the budget problem would really work, how well, over what period of time. Without such data, any decision that is made will be arbitrary, ineffective, pure guesswork.

Wouldn't it be nice if the peoples' duly elected legislators stopped playing games, and showed they really cared about their constituents by agreeing to work together on a solution?

As a principle in putting together a budget, Senate President Paul Manglona's idea of giving department heads and expenditure authorities the flexibility to make cuts within their areas on a case-by-case basis, rather than forcing arbitrary cuts in specific categories, would seem a far better approach. It might even enhance accountability.

Another "outside the box" solution that has merit is the suggestion that the legislature consider imposing a "sweet" tax instead of increased sin taxes for more revenue. Almost everyone eats sugar products of one sort or another, offering a huge revenue target. The suggestion appeared in the 4/22 issue of the *Saipan Tribune* in a letter to the editor. The CK writer wrote, "Obesity, and subsequent diabetes, has[sic] become an epidemic in the CNMI. Is this not a sin?... If it is not a sin, then we need to initiate a new ploy and name it "sweet tax." What a great idea!

Accountability of a different sort was the subject of two films shown over the past few days at American Memorial Park in recognition of Earth Day and Environmental Awareness Month. "End of the Line" deals with the destruction of fisheries that is occurring around the world due to over-fishing, a phenomenon brought about by the ever bigger, better, faster technologies that humans have developed in recent years. As supplies dwindle, fish stock are now being caught before they mature, giving the species no time to breed and reproduce.

As the bigger fish disappear, and what those had fed on multiply, only to be caught in turn, the delicate balance between coral, algae, fish, other creatures of the sea is upset, affecting every species up and down the food line. If not stopped, it is predicted that this behavior will eventually see humans eating jelly-fish sandwiches, as the only product of the sea still able to survive.

Three things are necessary to prevent such a disaster, according to the film: establishment of "no-take" marine preserves that will allow fish to reproduce, the assumption of responsibility by the fishing industry for controlled harvesting, and an understanding by humans of the damage their behavior has cost, and will continue to cost if it is not changed.

The second film, "Home" was quite similar in its theme: humans are destroying the resources of the earth due to their use of bigger, better, faster technologies. The planting of mono-crops, reckless destruction of forests, despoiling and pollution of water resources, has upset the balance of nature between the world's carbon dioxide-absorbent woodlands, an adequate water supply, disaster-proof versatility, and habitat variety. As land loses its productivity, more people starve.

Random quotes from the film: "All the successive species on earth have drunk the same water." "The engine of life is linkage." "Children are a family's only [natural] asset." "Agriculture is the world's most wide-spread occupation, it is a prerequisite for survival." "Forests are the mother and father of rain." "Agriculture consumes 70% of the world's water." "Wetlands and marshes are essential to the regeneration and purification of water."

The film was much too long - some two hours - and I did not stay til the bitter end so if solution was offered at the end, I missed it.

The over-all message of the two films is, nonetheless, very clear. Humans, in the relatively few years of their existence - compared to the age of the earth - have done incredible damage to their "home" and stand to lose it entirely if they do not change their patterns of behavior.

Short takes:

An e-mail making the rounds suggests that people with new cars keep their car keys handy at bedtime, in parking lots, anytime they are in the vicinity of their cars, because the car's "panic button" can act like a security alarm. Setting off the alarm will alert others near by that there is a problem, and should scare off any burglar attempting to break into a house, predator stalking a pedestrian, or a thief considering a hold-up.

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Many thanks to Jane Mack for speaking up on the subject of the governor's commutation of sentence, the Parole Board's decision to grant parole, in the case of David Tanaka Diaz. Diaz, a "three-peat offender" had been sentenced to 25 years without parole for drug trafficking, with lesser sentences for other crimes.

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Who will speak out concerning the governor's sole source hiring of a new "consultant to the Secretary of Public Lands" who happens to be a convicted federal felon? Concerning the addition of \$135,000 to the government's payroll (\$100,000 in two contracts to the consultant, another \$35,000 to a "DPL liaison to the Northern Islands Development projects") this past week alone?

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This month's *Commonwealth Register* is quite hefty - it contains the full text of P.L. 15-108, the Commonwealth Employment Act of 2007 as amended by the Immigration Conformity Act of 2010 "for interim use by the public prior to the publication of the official version by the Law Revision Commission." It also contains proposed rules and regs for implementing the changes to P.L. 15-08 that were enacted in P.L. 17-01, the Immigration Conformity Act of 2010. Since a summary of the proposed rules by reputable reporter Haidee V. Eugenio appears in today's *Saipan Tribune*, there's no need for further comment here. Also included in this issue: notification of the adoption of regulations of the Medical Referral Service as printed in the February 19, 2010 issue of the *Register*, and notice of repeal of Immigration Division, part 5, subchapter 40, of Immigration Division Rules and Regulations of the Attorney General.

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Much as one may empathize with Rota senators who have proposed putting the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument on Rota, the practicalities simply do not support such a move. With Rota's airport as small as it is, airplane access to the island is limited, and the same is true of the seaport. Properly packaged, the spillover benefits to Rota from having the monument on Saipan could far outweigh the benefits of locating the monument on Rota. A look at practicalities also makes clear that the suggestion to put the monument in the lighthouse on Navy Hill isn't any better. The lighthouse is tall and narrow - severely restricting display space, any thought of including of an aquarium on the premises. By the time one added an elevator to the building, there wouldn't be much room for anything else. Legislators are squandering a golden opportunity to bring additional visitors to the CNMI with such petty politicking.

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Question of the week (or the month? Or the year???): Being a lame duck governor, what is the point of Fitial's heavy-handed intrusion into personnel - and other - matters everywhere? He's dictating not only hiring, firing, contract payments, but also parole decisions and who knows what else. But what has he to gain? He cannot run again, so it's not as though such acts would win him votes. Can it all possibly be a matter of personal vindictiveness? In which case, maybe he, too, should undergo some anger management and related treatments? Or can it be he has delusions of grandeur, and wants to be crowned king? In which case.....