

On My Mind

7/09/10

Thanks, apparently, to the efforts of Secretary of Commerce Michael M. Ada, a Small Business Development Center office has been re-established in the CNMI after an inexplicable 10-year absence. Only time will tell whether it's already too late, or whether the SBDC and its director Gary Liddle will indeed be able to bring meaningful help to the CNMI's failing economy.

In stressing the importance of long term planning in his brief remarks at the Chamber of Commerce's monthly luncheon earlier this week, Liddle noted that if the government and the business community had, in the past, focused on long terms solutions, rather than short term, some problems currently facing the CNMI might have been avoided.

Liddle said, "We are here to help you see your business in a different light," and while he made no specific promises, the inference appeared to be that SBDC could bring about closer cooperation between government and the local private sector community than has existed up until now. We can only hope.

Glocal entrepreneur Walt Goodridge described a potential new business with great enthusiasm in Wednesday's <i>Saipan Tribune</I> - a veritable new industry, in fact - a chain of organic fruit juice bars selling locally grown and locally packaged herbally enhanced fruit juice to health enthusiasts from as far away as Japan, Korea, China. With his skills and talent, Goodridge could, if he so desired, no doubt pull it off all by himself. However, for lesser mortals, it might be more difficult. But now that the SBDC is locally available with its offerings of help in counseling, training, outreach, even lesser mortals should be able to undertake such a project, and bring it to successful fruition.

Another project that might benefit from the presence of the SBDC is the establishment of a visitor's information center on Saipan/in the CNMI. A college friend of mine who refuses to own or use a computer - she is, after all, in her seventies - wrote and asked for pictures, brochures, or whatever else I could provide about where I was now living. Though I'm not quite as technologically "illiterate" as she is - I do own and use a computer - I don't do photographs, don't know how to put them into my computer, don't know how to print them out.

In most tourist areas, there'd be a tourist/visitors' information center where I would have been able to pick up or purchase photographs, brochures, maps, a range of soft-cover and coffee table-type books - all describing the various tourist spots, the history and culture, the flora and fauna of the place - maybe even buy some decent souvenirs.

Unfortunately, in the CNMI, such a place does not exist. The MVA only has advertiser-based maps, in Japanese. Some stores carry some photographs. The ABC store has a nice calendar of tropical flowers. Not many stores have other than tacky souvenirs.

What a golden opportunity for some enterprising entrepreneur! With a loan from the SBDC, help from potential stakeholders, s/he could set up a visitors' information center that offered photographs in various packages. There's enough talent on island to develop any number of brochures and pamphlets - on specific historic sites, on particular dive sites, on flora and fauna, on the different villages, on the different periods of CNMI history. Ambitious authors and photographers might put together selected coffee-table books - large, hardbound, on heavy paper, with quality content. With a good printer, current maps could be downloaded from the web (not sure of copyright here) and sold separately. The materials could be made available in Korean, Russian, Chinese, as well as English and Japanese.

The gift shop could offer NMI quarters encased in plastic (as a key chain?), local artists' cards and prints, woven baskets, coconut carvings, jewelry - all locally made from local products - all available year-round during regular store hours, and not just during periodic art fairs, at the street markets. Tastefully designed mugs, key chains, paper plates and napkins, note paper, pillow cases, scarves, all decorated with images of flame tree blossoms, local tropical flowers and cactii - the possibilities are endless - could also be sold at the gift shop. In time, the visitors' center might even want to sponsor/conduct a real flame tree festival while the flame trees are in bloom, so it can be advertised and draw tourists as do the cherry blossom festivals in Japan, in Washington, D.C.

To avoid the schlock, the visitors' information center could establish qualifying standards for the souvenirs it sells. It could be a non-profit. It could be operated by volunteers. It could be sponsored, in part if not in whole, by the Hotel Association of the NMI.

And I'd have something to send my friend. Would have had something to take with me when I visited my cousin in Germany, when I went to visit the parents of my daughter-in-law in HongKong, when we went diving in Fiji, went back east to visit friends and family, and wanted to bring along something to show what it was like where I lived, wanted to bring meaningful relevant gifts - other than the ubiquitous t-shirt - as tokens of appreciation, as thank-you gifts.

In fact, if, as, and when, an information center for the Marianas Trench monument ever gets approved, the tourist/visitors' information center described above could join forces with, share space with, or even serve as the nucleus for, the marine monument information center. What an opportunity!

Short takes:

Lots of opportunities for outings in the coming days, starting with the launch and

book signing by former judge Jose DeLaCruz' of his book, *From Colonialism to Self Government* at American Memorial Park theater **this Saturday at 10:00 a.m.**

- a tsunami awareness workshop at the Hyatt's Sand Castle on **Tuesday, July 13 from 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.** for government and non-government agencies that are part of the response action team, and on **Wednesday, July 14, same place, same hours**, for the private sector and all other interested parties. Contact person is J.T. Camacho at 322-9528/8001.

- a lecture on business ethics on **Wednesday, July 14 at the AMP theater at 6:00 p.m.** by visiting law professor Robert Desideroi, former dean of the New Mexico School of Law.

- a lecture on the role of large corporate businesses in society on **Thursday, July 15 at 11:30 a.m. at the Guma Hustisia library** by visiting law professor Robert Desiderio.

- a lecture on "The Modern [U.S.] Constitution on **Friday, July 16, at noon at the Guma Hustisia library** by visiting law professors Rose Cuison Villazor of Hofstra University Law School and Robert Desiderio.

- a meeting to discuss privatization of CUC as a utility co-op on **Friday, July 16 at 7:00 p.m. at the American Memorial Park Ampitheater**, organized by Fred A. Prosser.

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First steps: the House has signed House Bill 17-38, authorizing the use of nuclear energy for the island's power needs. Envisioned is the purchase of a small modular self-contained nuclear power reactor that has recently come on the market. It is said the governor is willing to sign the bill. The position of the Senate is not clear.

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The notion that the CNMI "reject" the Department of Interior report to the U.S. Congress on the status of foreign workers in the CNMI is illogical, at best. The CNMI can do what it wants with it - the report was not requested by the CNMI, nor was it made to the CNMI. One can reject the arguments it makes, one can disagree with its conclusions, but to "reject" the report isn't possible - one can't reject something one wasn't offered to begin with.

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Frustrated by the government's inaction, Retirement Fund members are developing their own strategies for reducing the Fund's unfunded liabilities. In addition to a lengthy list of suggestions - not all of them equally practical - several members have proposed a more narrow three-part approach: cutting retirement benefits, selling RF assets, and conducting a desk audit within the RF. That members of the RF are themselves working on cutting liabilities - and doing so by offering to give up partial benefits, even though it is the administration that is primarily responsibility for the RF's unfunded liabilities - says a great deal about the dedication, principles, and integrity of both the administration and the RF membership. Unfortunately, neither the list, nor the three-part option are posted to the Commonwealth Retirement Association's web site: < www.cnmiretires.com >.

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For a society that has become as litigious as has this one, it is surprising that no one has yet filed suit against MPLT, the legislature and the administration for seemingly violating Article X, Section 3 and Section 4 of the Constitution in loaning out MPLT monies for government operations without the necessary legislative approval.

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This neighborhood was blissfully quiet over the 4th of July week-end. At least the law against selling fireworks seems to have been observed and enforced.