

On My Mind
7/16/10

There's an adage, a saying, that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." Normally, it's viewed as a positive: it's the one who speaks up about a problem that gets the attention. But sometimes that adage can backfire. And it appears that that has been the case in regard to Northern Marianas College being put on notice for accreditation.

The problem seems to be that, in this case, those calling for grease of a squeaky wheel have an imperfect understanding of the problem. NMC is struggling, as are all agencies in the CNMI, with budget shortfalls, and with staff shortages, among other things. Moreover, it is just recuperating from the firing of a problematic former president. But with an energetic and dedicated Board President, and support throughout the institution, these problems are being addressed in a professional, competent manner. Nevertheless, outspoken local critics of NMC have written multiple letters to the accreditation board as well as in the local media. They've called attention to what they erroneously consider a squeaky wheel.

Most of the local community recognize that the reporters of this particular "squeaky wheel" are known to often voice criticisms that are biased, having little or no basis in fact, and therefore don't pay them much attention. Unfortunately, NMC's accreditation board did not know that, did not make an effort to validate the credibility of those doing the criticizing, and acted on the assumption that the criticisms were valid.

As a result, NMC has been hit with a punitive "show cause" order that threatens its very survival. It is incumbent on everyone in the CNMI - from student to legislator, from parent to teacher, from businessman to government official - to support NMC in responding to that order, and to convince the accreditation board that not all e-mails and letters to the editor are legitimate.

Furthermore, it would appear that NMC is not alone in feeling the wrath of accrediting agencies. The tendency seems much broader. See <
http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2008/07/by_anne_neal_the_western.html >.

Facing an unfriendly, if not hostile, court, Judge Govendo came out guns ablazing yesterday afternoon to argue that he should be given a hearing in the process of determining whether comments he'd made in various courtroom procedures violated the court's judicial canons. Not everything that may be inappropriate is necessarily in violation of the judicial code of ethics, he told justice pro tem Edward Manibusan, associate justice Alex Castro and Chief Justice Miguel Demapan.

Maybe it was an indication of his frustration that the matter was even in an open court - all sides have virtually admitted that the proceedings more appropriately belonged in an internal disciplinary hearing. Maybe it was a question of not being familiar with intra-judicial proceedings, but it sure seemed like Govendo might have won more points

if he'd shown more deference to the panel that would, in essence, decide his fate. In any case, as both papers reported today, the panel took the arguments under advisement. Let us hope they are reasonable and flexible enough in this precedent-setting situation to give Govendo his day in court.

Both at the launching of his book *From Colonialism to Self-Government: the Northern Marianas Experience* last week, and in the book itself, former Justice Jose dela Cruz talks about a "vision" for the CNMI. To overcome the CNMI's economic slump, dela Cruz believes that the CNMI needs a plan, a roadmap, together with a "vision for the future."

In the book, he suggests that goals and objectives be established for the vision and that they include such things as having a good quality of life, a lifestyle that promotes good health, a well-educated population, a sound economy, fair and equal treatment for all members of the community. These are certainly worthy - and fairly universal goals - though not always easy to obtain, even in a democratic setting.

But a "vision" can also be thought of in a much broader setting. For example, the vision might be what islanders want the CNMI to be, and how they might want others to view, think about, see, the CNMI. Do they want to become, do they want others to think of the CNMI as an industrial center, with factories and hordes of factory workers living in barracks? as one big shopping mall? as totally urbanized, complete with vista-blocking high rises and traffic jams? as a "wild" place, with legalized marijuana and casino gambling?

Though the islands' warm weather, warm, clear waters, tropical birds, broad vistas, historical sites, coral reefs and sandy beaches may just seem normal and ordinary to those who live in the CNMI, to those who are its primary potential clientele - people from Asia, Alaska, Australia - such tropical island characteristics often constitute their vision of a perfect vacation site - something desirable that they do not have at home.

It is true that the CNMI does not have Palau's Rock Islands, it does not have Pohnpei's Nan Madol, or Maui's waterfalls, Waikiki's extensive beaches, Guam's shopping malls, the Philippines' bargain goods at bargain prices, Bali's distinctive charm. It's only natural resource - other than Pagan's alleged pozzolan - is nature itself. But in addition to the attraction of being tropical islands, the CNMI has the advantage of being conveniently accessible, being politically stable, and being under the American flag.

The vision, then, of what CNMI could become, and what it could offer others (others meaning mainly tourists, but also investors) is as a peaceful, relaxing place that emphasizes what nature offers not only on land - with its tiny tropical birds, colorful tropical flowers, great, green swaths of wildlife sanctuary and scenic vistas - but also underwater, with a variety of tropical fish and distinctive corals - a model of conscious and responsible protection and preservation of the environment - as well as a place with a unique culture reflected in its food, artifacts, dances and music; a place of both historic and unique archaeological interest; a place where a diverse population co-habits peace-

fully and consequently offers an unusually wide range of dining experiences.

If this - a nature-based environment-friendly place - was adopted as the vision for the CNMI it would give focus to all manner of decisions and actions that now occur willy-nilly. For example, is a six-story building along the shoreline really a good idea when open vistas are part of the vision of what the CNMI should be? Does it make sense to build a road through a major area of undisturbed forest when protection of greenery and habitat are part of CNMI's vision? Does a casino fit that vision?

The vision could extend further without jeopardizing its "green" image: it could include an organic agriculture industry and production of healthy herbal medicines, it could broaden its offerings to schooling for foreign students; it could develop retirement communities for senior citizens of other countries, to name just a few.

A vision for the future based on what nature offers would seem to be the most logical, economical, practical choice for the CNMI to make. The CNMI would not be dependent on others to bring in raw materials, on a large unskilled labor force, on other's tax and trade codes. It would not take years to develop. It would not have to await wealthy foreign investors. The basics are in place now - all it would take is nurturing what is already there.

Dela Cruz wrote that a group had been meeting to talk about what could be done to help the Commonwealth, but that "It would be pointless for the group to keep on making recommendations if island leaders do not follow up on the recommendations."

The group did discuss establishing a nonpartisan 'future commission' charged with drafting a written vision for the future, but apparently did not follow up on the idea. Since it was envisioned as being non-political, it would seem unnecessary to wait for the government - or any of its branches - to form such a commission. The group, as members of the private sector, could establish it themselves, as a non-profit institution, and develop their own charter. With respected people of integrity on the board, such an institution could well achieve credibility in its own right. It could itself provide the leadership that the group found lacking in today's environment.

Short takes:

Jaime Vergara, in this week's column in the *Saipan Tribune*, talks of invasive species, and wrote, "Instead of spending tons of dough on fencing out invasive plants [sic] and animals, we might learn from the Tilapia: make them a pleasant presence in our dining tables!" So perhaps we should start promoting brown tree snake steaks, grilled brown tree snake, brown tree snake stew, barbeque, and pupus as expensive gastronomic delicacies. Might make people far more zealous in trying to catch the things!

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It seems so glaringly obvious: Tinian's casino has not brought Tinian - or the CNMI - significant revenue. How then, can anyone argue that a casino on Saipan would

do so?