

On My Mind

7/23/10

It is interesting to speculate what the results would be if everyone who'd been off-island were to name one feature s/he would like to see become part of the CNMI "landscape," so to speak. In light of former justice Jose Dela Cruz' interest in the formation of a vision for the CNMI, would one of the newspapers be willing to devote space to a "write-in" where people could submit what they'd like to see become part of that vision?

"Vision," according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2d edition, has as one of its meanings, "the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom." Another is "a person or sight of unusual beauty." The *American Heritage College Dictionary* includes in its definitions, "a mental image produced by the imagination."

This past Wednesday's *Marianas Variety* headline that the "Garapan fishing base is for big investor," with talk of a hotel on the site is, of course, one vision for that area. But the thought of that open vista being blocked by yet another high-rise hotel strikes me more as nightmare than as either imaginative or a thing of beauty. For starters, who would even want to build another hotel, given the low occupancy rate of those already in existence?

Instead, wouldn't it be wonderful to have it as a "natural" park, with slides and swings for kids, benches and tables for picnics, a wandering path throughout, all under shady, flowering trees - so that tourists who get claustrophobia in their hotel rooms and/or are tired of shopping can find a pretty place nearby to wander around in and get a view of the ocean, some fresh air, a place where their kids can play? And where the open vista would still be there for everyone?

Yes, there's American Memorial Park - but it has a different character. Garapan's park would be more accessible. It would be more compact, intimate, with more equipment for kids - locals as well as tourists. It would provide refreshing greenery in the middle of a rather barren area. Properly done, it could even conceivably still accommodate the Tuesday farmer's market.

Would it be a revenue generator? Not directly. But it sure would add appeal to the area, and thus, to Saipan - offering more than one place for tourist children to play outdoors without getting sunburnt!! One could add a restaurant/open air cafe.....

On the down side, said far better than I could, herewith slightly edited excerpts from a letter written to numerous retirees by a retiree now living in the mainland: "*....the only way any meaningful action is going to occur [re the government paying its debt to the Retirement Fund] is if the government is commanded to do so by a federal court judge. Putting it in terms of a sick patient, the Fund is now on life support in critical*

condition. If no action is taken soon, this patient is going to die, and over 5,000 Fund members will ALL be weeping at that funeral, believe me.

.... no one in office seems willing to rock the boat or their own political future to do what's right and what's needed to save the pension system for over 5,000 people who depend on it.

For a whole year since the \$282 million judgement was awarded to the Fund, we've seen an entire government sit back and do almost nothing to initiate payments to the Fund. If those voted into office are not willing or able to address the issue of protecting the best interests of the retirees they serve, then give the issue to someone who will...the federal court.

If the court ruled in the Fund's favor, it would no doubt swiftly set expectations and time frames for payment to be met, with no more excuses or delays. No one realistically expects the government to pay the whole amount at once, but the court could certainly get the ball rolling. Hopefully the court could appoint a receiver for the purpose of CONSERVING the Fund, NOT closing it down, and let the receiver get to work on collecting the debts and seizing assets (if necessary). With the federal court's enforcement authority, these actions may actually be possible.

The question still stands... where are the lawmakers who know in their hearts what will happen to the Fund if they fail in their jobs to resolve this? Why have there been no "state of emergencies" called to address the Fund's financial crisis? Where are the passionate debates on Capitol Hill about how to save the Fund? They certainly participated and took swift action when they passed the law to suspend all employer contributions to the Fund!

So, maybe Fund members (and voters) should ask themselves why there aren't any politicians out there spearheading actions to save the Fund. It would seem there could only be a few reasons. Perhaps it's the inability or incapability to act? Or, maybe it's the indifference to act, fear to act, or maybe they are purposefully not acting due to a hidden agenda? What else could it be, if not one of those reasons? And if it is one of those reasons, then maybe the voters need to make some changes. Can anyone else think of why they're so silent and seemingly indifferent about the Fund's financial meltdown?

Sadly, it seems the retirees are the only ones who care at this point.

For those retirees who live on island, how about getting a big group of retirees and Fund members together, load up the cars and trucks with people, call the media, then go up on Capitol Hill and crowd into the chamber at the Legislature. Make the lawmakers stop, look all of you in the eyes, and take the time to listen to your pension concerns."

Short takes:

It's hard to get a handle on just how short of money the CNMI actually is. If the situation is really as dire as some say it is, how can Saipan continue to support a mayor's office, a municipal council and a local delegation - all responsible just for Saipan? How can Tinian afford to pay its gaming commissioners the lordly sum of \$75,000 per year?

How can legislators justify continuing to draw their full allowances? How is it there is still money to give to athletes and students for competing in off-island contests of one sort or another? I understand the value to the students, the pride at issue for athletes. But if the CNMI is REALLY broke - as the fact that it can't pay its nurses, can't get paychecks out on time, seems to imply - the question is unavoidable: are those the best uses for what little money is available?

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The legislature is generating ever more amendments to the CNMI Constitution, in addition to the 50+ that have already been added during its short life span. Visiting law professor Robert Desiderio, on island to conduct pre-law classes for local aspirants, noted that perhaps the CNMI Constitution contained too much detail and is too easy to amend. The U.S. Constitution, in contrast, has been amended only 27 times (with ten being included in the Bill of Rights) over its more than 200-year history. Legislators might ask themselves: does this issue rise to a constitutional (i.e., long-term, permanent) level?

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It's always dangerous to play with numbers, but for what it's worth, the *Marianas Variety* recently reported that the Corrections Department's was authorized up to 113 personnel in 2009. It also reported that the governor had just authorized the hiring of 28 personnel to fill vacancies in the department. Assuming that would bring the total up to the authorized level, that would mean that the department has had 85 employees. With between 130-140 prisoners in jail at any given moment, that's .62 employees for every prisoner; fully staffed at 113, that would make it .83 - or nearly one employee for every prisoner. In comparison, nationwide, there is one federal prison staff member to every 4.92 inmates.

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The USPS fails again: a birthday card sent by my brother, mailed in the Boston suburb of Brookline, Massachusetts, was returned to him with one of those finger-pointing stamps - this one read: <i>Country of destination must be shown in English in last line of address for intl mail IMM 211-44</I>. The last line of the address written on the envelope was "Saipan MP 96950." And, it was clearly written. One might understand a small village post office rejecting that address, but a big, urban one? His home post office (in a small town) let him re-send the card in a new envelope, for free.....

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More on products from the brown tree snake: there's also its skin, from which one could make belts and wallets and purses.....