

On My Mind

8/20/10

It would have been funny if it weren't such a serious business: watching twenty prima donnas (usually referring to temperamental operatic singers) up on the hill each insistent on singing to his or her own music with no thought of ever singing together as a chorale, interrupted and over-ridden now and then by another self-styled prima donna equally uninterested in singing anything other than solo, while off on the side-lines, ignored but awaiting their turn were nine more, no doubt just as eager to sing to their own music.

Ordinarily, the function of the director of such groups is to bring harmony to the whole. In this instance, it would appear that rather than finding a mutually accepted approach to the music, as that position is supposed to do, the leader insisted on continuing to sing his own tune. Two inharmonious sub-groups emerged as a result, with the dominant prima donnas finally prevailing. It's as though they realized they couldn't pull it together, so they decided to quit and let their nine colleagues give it a try.

Admittedly, it's unfair to paint all twenty prima donnas with the same brush. Some are better singers than others.....

At stake is the 2011 budget for the CNMI, and the deadline for putting one in place is getting ever closer. What happens if no budget is approved in time? According to the CNMI Constitution, *"If a balanced budget is not approved before the first day of the fiscal year, no money shall be drawn from the General Fund, provided that certain government services and employees shall remain available **as provided by law** [emphasis added] in order to deliver services essential to the health, safety, and welfare of the people of the Commonwealth and to protect against damage to and destruction of property....and if the legislature does not pass a balanced budget by October 1st, the legislators's salaries shall be suspended until such time that a balanced budget is passed by the legislature."*

With such broad language and no guidance developed since that amendment to the Constitution was passed, the answer is, "No one knows." What is clear, though, is that, particularly under the present administration, it won't be good.

What would it take to get a balanced budget out in time? At this point, only a major change of attitude. Ordinarily, there would now be committee consideration in the Senate, followed by open floor debate, and, eventually, passage of a budget almost guaranteed to be different from the one passed by the House, followed by conference committee meetings, more debate in both houses, and hopefully, eventual passage. Possible in the time remaining? Theoretically, yes. Realistically, probably not.

Maybe what's needed is to step back, try to think "outside the box," as they say, and try a different approach. What would happen, for example, if every government agency were given a lump sum that was proportionate to a combination of their budget last year and their request this year? Instead of debating the number of FTE's to allocate to each agency, why not let the agency itself determine where and what its needs are?

After all, it's unrealistic to expect the legislators to understand the operations of each agency so well that they are able to distinguish between an agency's personnel and equipment needs better than can the agency itself.

"Balance" the budget in terms of making sure income and outgo match - that the figures used are accurate and current, and the allocations fair - but nit-picking within agencies just doesn't seem very productive.

Nor does it seem very productive to have ignored the Senate in this process. Especially at this point, when the clock is ticking so loudly.

Would it not have been possible to call for a meeting of the committee of the whole, and have the Senate and House members address the budget in a single process? Even now, perhaps after the Senate has a week to review it on its own, could it not call for such a joint session? Of course, the Senate will complain that it did not get equal time to consider the budget, but justified as it is, that complaint should be put aside for the sake of the Commonwealth as a whole.

Under the circumstances, it would make much more sense to let everyone have at it at once. It would be nice if one could sequester them, and hold them hostage, so to speak, until they could come up with a unified position. Then, should the administration again throw in an objection at the last minute, as it seems to be doing rather consistently, there would be consensus to over-ride a veto, should it be threatened.

Or how about bringing in a professional mediator/negotiator?

Untraditional? Perhaps. But not unconstitutional. And in dire times, dire steps may be necessary.

Please, members of the 17th Legislature, stop your solo acts. They're not funny any more.

Roilin' Froilan's insistence on abolishing the Legislative Bureau is, perhaps, one of the worst acts of them all, second only to his persistence in pushing casino gambling. The Legislative Bureau was established to help the Legislature become more efficient, its operations more cost-effective. Abolishing it will return the Legislature to where it was before: each separate office duplicating what the others are doing in terms of obtaining legal opinions and assistance, in terms of maintaining records, files and other legislative documents, in terms of maintaining separate administrative staff, making each less efficient and more costly to operate and maintain.

Whatever Froilan's problem is or was with the director of the Legislative Bureau, it's time he did a reality check, acknowledged the central functions the Bureau provides, and focused on the real issues.

It's also time someone did a reality check regarding health services available in the CNMI. Without the privatization of radiology services - as almost happened were it not for the intervention of the "administration" - CHC is left without qualified personnel to

read CT scan results, and must send them to Guam - to the very same person who would have run CHC's radiology clinic - and trust to his good graces to take the time to read and send back a report despite still being owed for past services. X-rays are read by CHC staff physicians, some of whom have more experience than others in doing so, but none of whom are trained radiologists. Ironically enough, the coconut wireless says that the radiology contract was cancelled in order to favor another physician - who is not even a radiologist, and would still have to send CT scans to Guam to be read.

The CHC lab, so the coconut wireless tells us, also lacks trained personnel, and must send some lab reports off-island to be read - in some cases causing life-threatening delays in diagnosis, treatment.

With federal officials slated to visit the CHC facility in the near future, these shortcomings could cost CHC millions of dollars in federal Medicare, Medicaid funding, could cost the community the ready availability of affordable health care it now receives.

Perhaps its too macabre a thought, but is it any wonder our cemeteries are filling up so fast?

One of the "other" types of tourism that the CNMI does not appear to promote is business tourism - hosting businesses's annual meetings, professional association's annual conventions. The meeting/convention business fills hotel rooms, supports local agriculture, local car rentals and taxis, local gift shops, but usually has a minimum effect on natural resources like corals, beaches, marine life, because attendees don't often stray very far from the meeting sites.

It does require one or two large auditoriums, and a host of smaller rooms, for committee meetings, as well as a conference administration facility, where papers can be duplicated quickly and easily, a local as well as high-tech message center can be located, and conference coordinators can hold forth.

Now that the Laderan International School for Saipan has closed, would it lend itself to use as a convention center?

Short takes:

I've been asked by the friends to who received that \$90,000 bill from CUC to please let everyone know that "CUC handled the manner in a very professional manner and resolved the billing discrepancy in a couple of days." Chalk one up for CUC!

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What a hole the passing of Len Kaufer leaves in my life! While we didn't meet or talk often, especially over the last several years, I was charmed anew every time we did. And I always knew Len was there - ever a delightful person, so knowledgeable, so concerned, so gentlemanly, so thoughtful. He will be sorely missed.

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The tax proposed on imported drinking water might benefit local drinking water

companies, but still doesn't seem quite fair. It's not the essential items that should be taxed - and with Saipan water not safe to drink, everyone is forced to buy water - but the inessentials, like wine, beer, liquor, tobacco products, candies and other sugary treats - things that aren't good for one anyway.

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It unfortunately came out on a Saturday, but the account of my daughter's eco-tourism talk that appeared in the 8/14 *Saipan Tribune* was a much better synthesis than mine. Find it at < <http://www.saipantribune.com/newsstory.aspx?cat=1&newsID=102181> >. The *Marianas Variety* did two stories, the second a full-page story on August 17th. I could not find the url in its archives.