

6/24/11

I attended my first ever teleconference last week, and was not impressed. I had thought that teleconferencing would be a well-established process by now, but last week's sure wasn't, and I was told that most teleconferences suffer the same problems - with sound, with sight, with delivery, and with their coordination into a cohesive whole - that plagued the one I attended. The teleconference originated at the University of Hawaii; it included American Samoa, Guam, the CNMI, and two other sites in Hawaii - at Kauai, and Maui.

It was intended to be a listening session on President Obama's national ocean policy - attendees listening to a series of speakers, and members of Obama's recently formed National Ocean Council listening to the concerns of attendees. Unhappily, there were only brief snippets of sight and sound during the first hour, when the speakers were on camera. It didn't get all that much better during the second hour, when it came time for the attendees to take their turn at the microphone.

Unfortunately - or fortunately, as the case may be - the session was not well advertised, and there were only three attendees in addition to the local moderator, two of whom (yours truly included) left in frustration before it was over.

Up for discussion were the five substantive and four procedural areas into which the NOC divided its approach to defining national ocean policy: Changing Conditions in the Arctic; Ocean, Coastal, and Great Lakes Observations, Mapping and Infrastructure; Regional Ecosystem Protection and Restoration; Resiliency and Adaptation to Climate Change and Ocean Acidification; Water Quality and Sustainable Practices on Land; and Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning; Ecosystem-Based Management; Coordinate and Support; and Inform Decisions and Improve Understanding [those verb forms are not typos!].

More information on the creation of the NOC and its final report can be found at < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ceq/initiatives/oceans/> >.

The National Ocean Council has now released its Strategic Action Plans for each of the nine areas of concern: the purpose of the Hawaii-based teleconference was to solicit opinion on the draft Plans. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/oceans/sap>. There's lots of verbiage in both documents - lots of boilerplate language about integration, cooperation and coordination, stakeholder interests, etc., etc., etc. Though the NOC final report provides an impressive definition of the National Policy for the stewardship of the ocean, the U.S. coast and the Great Lakes - see http://www.whitehouse.gov/files/documents/OPTF_FinalRecs.pdf - the Action Plans seem to lose sight of them. Not only is the term "stewardship" problematic - assuming, as it does, that the U.S. is in charge, control of, the ocean surrounding it, rather than being beholden to the ocean for its survival, but there appears to be a focus throughout on the services obtained from the ocean, coastal and Great Lakes waters, rather than the responsibilities the U.S. has toward maintaining the ocean's health.

A new concept - that of "spatial planning," or zoning, for the ocean, coast and Great Lakes is also a little disturbing. Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning (one of the four procedural areas for which a SAC is outlined in the report) is defined, in the NOC documentation, as "a comprehensive, adaptive, integrated, ecosystem-based, and transparent spatial planning process, based on sound science, for analyzing current and anticipated uses of ocean, coastal, and Great

Lakes areas. CMSP identifies areas most suitable for various types or classes of activities in order to reduce conflicts among uses, reduce environmental impacts, facilitate compatible uses, and preserve critical ecosystem services to meet economic, environmental, security, and social objectives. In practical terms, CMSP provides a public policy process for society to better determine how the ocean, coasts, and Great Lakes are sustainably used and protected - now and for future generations." a paragraph which typifies the problem with the NOC output, in my opinion.

Another problem with the NOC and its strategic action plans is the lack of any sense of urgency. A recent report by the highly regarded International Union for the Conservation of Nature says that "the health of the world's oceans is declining much faster than originally thought," according to an AP news release published in the *Saipan Tribune* earlier this week. Director of global marine programs at the IUCN Carl Lundin is quoted as saying, "Things seem to be going wrong on several different levels....When you put them all together it's a pretty bleak situation." Yet these SAP's are only drafts, and remain to be approved, much less implemented. Given the state of the economy, and the many new positions and offices and bureaus the NOC approach calls for, it will be several years before it all falls into place - during which time the ocean will continue to deteriorate, more species will go extinct, more reefs will die.

Those with the stamina and resolve to plow through the NOC reports have until July 2 to send comments to: < <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/oceans/sap/comments> >.

The final, and most critical, of the hearings on the re-write of Saipan's zoning law is scheduled for Thursday, June 30th at 6:00 p.m. at the zoning office in the JoeTen building in Dandan. Up for discussion are the proposal to wipe out almost all "conditional" uses so that few developments would require a hearing, and the proposal to zone 600 feet either side of 21 island roads as "commercial" - meaning that anything from a car repair shop to a trash disposal site would be allowed next to the many residences that now sit along those same roads.

The roads: Afetna, As Gonno, As Perdido, Beach, Chalan Msgr. Guerrero, Chalan Msgr. Martinez, Chalan Pale Arnold, Chalan Santa Lourdes, Chalan Talafofo, Chalan Tun Thomas P. Sablan, Dandan, Flame Tree, Kagman, Koblerville, Naftan, Navy Hill, Sugar King, Texas, Tun Herman Pan, Tun Kiyoshi, and Isa Drive. Those who live on any of these roads, and don't want to see commercial development next to their homes, are urged to come to the hearing to voice their concerns.

Short takes:

- In follow-up to last week's bit on the flame tree blossoms, these bits of trivia, sent to me by long-time former CNMI resident Bill Stewart: in 1912 a vessel owned by Japanese Mail Steamship Company delivered the first cargo of trans-Pacific cherry tree saplings -- a gift from the Mayor of Tokyo to Washington, D.C. In Japan the cherry blossom is cherished as a symbol of the transience of life and its fleeting moments of happiness as the blossoms do not wilt on the tree -- but fall to the ground in full flower.

- Due to financial constraints, the powers that be have announced that there will only be one performer/group per night at the Liberation Day festivities in Garapan. What a perfect opportunity to offer amateur groups an audience! Couldn't the stage be opened to anyone who has an appropriate act to fill in all that free time? All it would take, it seems, is availability of acoustical support. One could set guidelines - but still.... common sense could prevail. A win-win

situation, as they say: free entertainment to attendees, and a free chance to perform to aspiring musical groups.

- Perhaps it's unfair to pick on the scholarship office for not trying to make its program more effective as its funding shrinks - since few other government agencies are making much of an effort either. Nonetheless, it would seem high time to re-assess just what the goal and purpose of the program are, what the program is meant to accomplish. Does a "grant-in-aid" - that apparently is given every eligible applicant regardless of need - make any sense? Wouldn't it be better to limit it to those in need, and, as funds are available, use the rest to reward those with higher grade point averages? Or those in identified "priority" fields of study? What about collecting from those who failed to meet their obligations under the program? Pouring more money into a bottomless pit makes no more sense here than it does in anywhere else in government.

- What is one to think when a \$50,000 reward still brings no useful information regarding the whereabouts of the Luhk sisters? It is beyond comprehension. Our prayers go out to them, and their family in this difficult situation.