

9/2/11

It sure would be nice if all those proponents of casino gambling let the rest of us know just how, and how soon, casinos, if approved, would help the economy. Once casino legislation is approved, then what? First of all, you'd have to find an investor. It is claimed that investors are out there, just waiting. OK, let's assume that's true. So next you'd have to find a place to set up the casino. If it was at one of those 200-room-minimum hotels mentioned in the bill, you'd have to remodel something somewhere to accommodate the casino and all its equipment. You couldn't just set up the machines in the lobby. How long would that take - from design and engineering to actual completion? How many jobs would that provide? If it was going to be a stand-alone casino, it would take a lot longer to find land and design a building to accommodate all the trappings casinos require, what with all the inspections and standards involved.

You'd have to order the equipment. First you'd have to decide what to order, and how many, and from where, from whom. You'd have to set up a credit line, place the order, wait for the equipment to reach Saipan - all of which would again take several months - unless it was all flown in, which could get pretty expensive.

You'd have to hire staff - jump the hurdles of EEC, the CNMI Department of Labor, Federal Immigration and Customs - a tough situation right now as the immigration rules are about to be issued. Unless trained staff were brought in, it would take time to train the staff to be the dealers and croupiers and security personnel for the casino. How long would that take? How many local jobs would it create?

You'd also have to get the word out to prospective gamblers. You'd have to advertise, maybe travel to other countries to sell the idea of coming to Saipan to gamble. How long would it take to build up a large enough number of "clients" for the casino to make a profit?

You'd also have to get the airlines to open up again, and schedule more flights into Saipan, so that the clients you have lined up can get here. How long would that take?

There's been no mention of such factors by casino proponents - and only a few major ones have been mentioned here, not the many hundreds of additional details involved in establishing a casino on Saipan. All one hears are the promises of what casinos could do, once they were established. As is often said, the devil is in the details - and no one ever mentions those. Given the many obstacles to doing business on Saipan that everyone complains about, how likely is it that even one casino would be operational within a year? And in the interim, how much would the economy improve? Enough to restore full work weeks for government employees? To increase payments to the Retirement Fund? Restore medical referral? To fulfill all the other promises that casino proponents are making?

Casino supporters aren't talking about such matters. All they're doing is making big promises. It would seem that both the supporters - and the general public - could use what is commonly referred to as a "reality check."

Though it's not been all that clear from reports in the newspapers, the Retirement Fund has filed a Motion for Reconsideration and for Equitable Relief in response to Judge Govendo's order that the Retirement Fund set aside \$1 million to safeguard government employee investments in the Retirement Fund. The motion proposes, among other things, several options for extending the life of the Retirement Fund - primarily by cutting pensions by various percentages. The cuts would be temporary, and fully restored, retroactively, once the Retirement Fund again had the means to do so.

A hearing on the motion is scheduled in Judge Govendo's court in room 205 at the Superior Court on Thursday, September 29, 2011, at 1:30 pm.

In the meantime, a few retirees are finally getting agitated enough about the situation to put together a list of proposed actions both by the Retirement Fund and by retirees to address the crisis. They are also pushing for a meeting of the so far largely ineffective Commonwealth Retirees Association.

Will anything come of it all? We can only hope!

As has been said before, if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. Another quote has it: if you don't know where you're going, you might not get there. Either way, it's not a very promising situation. Yet that seems to be exactly what is happening in the CNMI. Other than the fact that the CNMI seems to be heading downhill, there doesn't seem to be any evidence that anyone has any idea of just where the CNMI should or could be going - or even where it might want to go.

Without a map, without a sense of direction, any effort that is made to improve or change the situation will not get very far. One can paddle a canoe as hard as one can, change direction as often as one wishes, but without a destination in mind, the canoe and its paddler will not get anywhere.

The first thing that is needed in deciding where you're going, is to decide where you want to end up, where you would like to be when you finish. Similarly, the first thing that the CNMI needs in deciding where it should/could be going, is to figure out what it should be like when one gets there. One way to define that destination is to form a "vision" - an imagined picture - of what that place is going to look like, how it's going to function, what it's going to be like to live there.

Past development of the CNMI has been driven by circumstance, by chance - not by the people who lived there. Though there have been numerous attempts, over the years, to define a vision for the CNMI, not one has yet succeeded in attracting enough supporters to even begin becoming a reality. Another attempt is now being launched - as was indicated in Frank Stewart's letter to the editor in the *Saipan Tribune's* 8/30 issue, in the *Marianas Variety's* 8/29 issue. Perhaps, with no other place to go but down, this is the perfect time to gather people together to determine where it is they really want to see the CNMI go. (*to be continued.*)

Short takes: - The newspapers reported that the Solid Waste Division has stopped collecting e-wastes. Apparently, this was not correct. Only collection of e-waste from commercial and government establishments has been stopped. E-waste from residential customers will continue to be collected. Others are asked to hold their e-waste until October 1, when collection will resume, but will include a fee for services. Because the CNMI cannot treat the e-wastes on island it has to ship them off-island, and is out of funds to do so until the start of the new fiscal year.

- The *Saipan Tribune's* story on building solar power plants on Saipan, which appeared in today's issue, was, in actuality, a press release issued by Sunlan Solar Company, Ltd, and as such, has several shortcomings. In the first place, no contact information was provided - making

confirmation of the information difficult, if not impossible. In the second place, the press release stated that a Memorandum of Agreement had been signed with the CNMI government and that the company would begin a one-megawatt power plant project to test the feasibility of the project, presumably immediately, but also stated that its target was to create the first 5-megawatt power plant by the end of the year - a seeming contradiction. Many agencies and organizations submit press releases to the newspapers, but not all, as this example proves, are equally credible.....

- Time is running out for inclusion in the prevailing wage survey being conducted by the Saipan Chamber of Commerce - the deadline is Thursday, September 8. The results are used as guides by companies to set wages for their employees, and by government to determine salary levels for contract employees, among other things. According to Andrew Andrus, Guam contractor who is conducting the survey, approximately 400 forms have been sent out and as of 9/2, approximately 100 have been returned. Forms may be obtained through the Saipan Chamber of Commerce ((670)233-7150), which will forward the names to Andrus who will, in turn, send out the form and accompanying information kits to applicants. Andrus can be reached at (671)649-6616. My condolences to the family of Bob Berkey, founder and president of Marianas Baptist Academy, who passed away in California last month at the age of 86. Reverend Bob was an indefatigable promoter of academics. Over the years, MBA students have won many competitive awards of excellence in the performing arts as well as more academic subjects as a result of his encouragement and support.