

10/7/11

The water is leaking out of the water tank faster and faster, and instead of plugging the holes, everyone involved is arguing about whom to put in charge, and what to do with what's left of the ever-shrinking amount of water. No one, apparently, even sees it as a crisis. And yet, a simple act by the legislature and the administration could at least stop the leak. Why isn't that happening? Why are they just sitting on their hands and watching the water spill out on the ground?

Regardless of who gets to decide how to manage what's left of the Retirement Fund's investments, or how to apportion them, it would seem clear that the first thing that needs to be done is to preserve what is still there. And that requires that the Derivative Beneficiary Act be repealed - a very simple procedure that the legislature could perform in a matter of hours, and the governor (or lieutenant governor if the governor is gone again) could sign equally quickly. Every day that the Derivative Beneficiary Act is allowed to remain in effect, the Retirement Fund's assets are decreasing, since they now can be invested only in mutual funds, which have a lower yield than equities. Every day that the Derivative Beneficiary Act is allowed to remain in effect, the costs to the Retirement Fund increase, as it must battle in court for a restraining order, must try to deal with the repercussions of the Act's provisions.

One would think both the retirees and the current members of the Retirement Fund would be up in arms about the inaction of the legislature. But they are not. And in the meantime, the amount of money at issue keeps getting smaller and smaller. Why aren't they concerned? What is it that they know, or believe, or think, that I do not?

A group calling itself "Occupy Wall Street" issued its first official statement earlier this week. On its own merits, it makes perfect sense: "As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known."

The group began its protest on Wall Street in New York City in mid-September. Similar protests have now spread to other cities across the nation including Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles. Strangely enough, very little about these protests has been carried by the local media. One wonders why.

One would think that the Marianas Visitors Authority, charged with bringing tourists to the CNMI, would be expert in the field of public relation and publicity, since it is good publicity that drives the tourism industry. Yet its record has been abysmal. One has but to visit its office, where information about the CNMI is - to all intents and purposes - non-existent. There are no maps, no brochures, no post-cards, no booklets, pamphlets, that describe the many tourist attractions that

abound in the CNMI. There are only advertisements - mostly in Japanese at that. The English-speaking tourist, the Korean, Chinese, Russian are completely ignored. There is no objective information, nothing to help find one's way around the island, no comprehensive list of restaurants, nothing to take home to share with friends.....

- or look at its web site. As was, at long last, publicly pointed out in the newspapers last week, the MVA web site is also abysmal. Information about the CNMI in general, or about its attractions, is sparse indeed! And instead of an immediate response, which would have been good public relations, the MVA waited a full week before issuing a press release on the matter - which has not yet made it into the papers. The not-yet-published release reports that an upgraded web site will be unveiled at the annual MVA membership meeting on October 11, and goes on to say that while the English-language web page may have been allowed to lapse, its Japanese and Korean language web pages are updated several times a month. There's no mention of a web page for the Chinese.

Now - was it prompted by the critical letter? - MVA has also actually issued a Request for Proposal for "local" public relations and media services! Particularly with MVA being such a political animal, the critical question is whether the successful bidder will be chosen on the basis of professional qualifications, or political affiliation.....

An agency that well understands and makes excellent use of public relations, on the other hand, is the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Not only has the USCIS offered countless information sessions over the past few weeks to practically all who asked - often booking more than one a day - but it has also made skillful use of the media with frequent press releases, meeting notices, and full-page newspaper question and answer presentations, as well as interviews on tv (and presumably radio as well). Despite the hassles and frustrations brought about by the Final Rule issued by the Department of Homeland Security, most people have only praise for the efforts made by the USCIS to provide what help it can in dealing with it all.

While "PR" - that is, public relations - is often considered a frill, an unnecessary expenditure, an unaffordable luxury, it can, if properly carried out, be a worthwhile investment. In the CNMI, it is an as-yet under-developed industry sector with lots of potential, as a few pioneers are discovering.....

Though historically, voter turn-out has not been very high if voters are only asked a "yes or no" question rather than to pick one person instead of another, the hope is that this time will be different. Voters will be asked, this November 4, whether or not they approve of casino gambling on Saipan. While the result will not be binding on the legislature or the administration, the referendum, being conducted by Sam McPhetres' Current Issues class at Northern Marianas College, gives voters the opportunity to let government officials - and pro-gambling interests - know, once again, where they stand on the question. The higher the turnout, the clearer, the more decisive, their voice will be. The PR campaign carried out by the students has, so far, been quite good.

To be eligible to vote on November 4, people will have had to vote in either of the past two elections. For those who did not, it will be necessary to register at the Election Commission, which is located in the former passport office next to the multi-purpose center in Susupe. It is open from 8:30 a.m. - to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Fridays (including lunch hours and austerity

Fridays). Identification in the form of a passport or birth certificate is required. Deadline for registration is October 20, 2011.

If enough people vote - and vote no - it should serve to finally take the issue off the table, so that the legislature would be free to focus on more realistic solutions to the problems facing the CNMI and its ailing economy.

One industry that is already profiting from the new federal immigration law is the media. Thanks to the USCIS requirement that good faith efforts must have been made to find U.S. citizen candidates for available positions before a contract worker can be hired, of late, on some days newspapers have been carrying almost two full pages of help-wanted ads - a great source of revenue - since the ads can be used as proof of effort.

On the other hand, does it benefit or profit anyone to carry endless stories of domestic violence and abuse in the newspaper? It can't help but be embarrassing to the victims, even though attempts are made to protect their names. There may be embarrassment to the alleged perpetrator, but is that the purpose of publicizing the incident? It may stir up the reader, but is that healthy?

Granted that the public should be made aware that domestic violence and abuse exist on island and that not all its perpetrators escape without punishment. But is it really necessary to air every sordid detail? What good does that do? To or for whom? Wouldn't readers be better served if there were more stories about positive acts, achievements, successes than about such failures in social responsibility?

Short takes:

- A simple way for the governor to solve his dilemma regarding the nomination of Joseph J. N. Camacho to the Superior Court would be to nominate a sitting judge from the Superior Court to fill the position on the Supreme Court that was vacated by retiring Justice Miguel S. Demapan. This would allow Camacho to be added to the roster of Superior Court judges while still reducing the total number of judges, since former Judge Ramona Manglona has now moved up to the federal level.

- Both the governor and the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Service have said they are looking into ways to allow foreign workers to continue providing caregiver services without having to go through a "u-drive"-type agency. Let's hope that, whatever solution is found, it does not require the "employer," to obtain the standard CNMI business license, with all the costs and bureaucratic requirements (like monthly tax reports) that that involves.

- Does the CNMI Attorney General's have so much free time on its hands, is it so caught up on all the possible corruption and other charges submitted to it by the Public Auditor's Office, and others, that it can afford to file charges where no complaint has been made, where no one has even suggested that a crime may have been committed? Today's *Saipan Tribune* reports that the AG's office has filed multiple charges, including homicide, against the driver of the vehicle involved in an accident in which a young boy lost his life. No one in the family, no friend, relative, bystander, has filed a complaint. All agree that no one was at fault, that it was an unfortunate accident. Yet the CNMI AG's office has taken it upon itself to see a crime where

none was committed, and with no concern for the family involved, has decided to drag the whole unhappy event into open court. Why? For whose benefit? For what purpose? What makes this a priority???

- An ad in the 10/05 *Marianas Variety* calls for a "request for proposal" for the landscaping of grounds around the PSS Central Office, now located at Marianas High School. That seems sort of an extravagant expenditure in today's poor economy, when everyone is suffering from cuts in his or her income and increasing utility costs, not to mention possible pension cuts or losses. Couldn't the "landscaping" be taken on as a class, or club, or parental project instead? How much landscaping is there room for in the first place? Does PSS really have so much money to spare that it can afford to bid out purely cosmetic extras?

* - There's not been all that much publicity about the new pedestrian crossing signals that are sprouting up on island. They are, of course, quite visible, but it wouldn't hurt to put out a few press releases on what the intent and purpose is, what the fine is for not stopping, how many more are planned, where the money for them came from, how long they are expected to last, how they operate - just so the general public will be more aware of them, more inclined to stop for their flashing lights. It wouldn't hurt, either, to put two of them up at the crossing by the Bank of Guam/Duty Free/Rakuen and Keeraku in Garapan. For the number of tourists that want to cross there, the existing one has the longest wait! And does not accommodate the "right turn on red light" onto Beach Road.

* - Seeking further readership, the *Tribune* has begun publishing a quarterly sports and health magazine called *Taga Sports* - the October-December issue is now out - while the *Variety* has begun publishing, monthly, the more general *Spice Magazine*, of which the second issue has now appeared. They are delivered to subscribers, and can be found at various smaller stores on island - and some gas stations. Their stories are interesting, well-written, and include lots of pictures.

* - Another "scoping meeting" has been scheduled, this time by the Air Force. The purpose of the session is "to provide information on the U.S. Air Force's proposal to improve an existing airfield on U.S. territory in proximity of the Philippine Sea in support of expanding mission requirements in the western Pacific, and the USAF's commitment to the environment, culture, and people of Guam and CNMI." The session is scheduled for Monday, October 17, from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Multi-purpose Center in Susupe.

More information is available at the web site: < www.PACAFDivertMarianasEIS.com >.

Deadline for comments is November 10, 2011. Once again, e-mail comments are unacceptable. One reader has suggested that this is a deliberate decision on the part of the military to avoid the possibility of being flooded by mass duplicate mailings from special interest groups.....