

10/28/11

It isn't a real vote, in that the results are not legally binding, but the referendum that will be held a week from today - November 4th - could have a greater impact on the CNMI than most "real" votes. People will be asked, once again, whether they believe casino gambling should be allowed on Saipan. If the vote shows a clear majority on one side or the other, it would at least settle the endless argument as to what the people want. If the majority votes against casinos, the legislature can no longer, in all good conscience, try to pass a bill allowing casinos on Saipan. On the other hand, if the majority vote for casinos, those who oppose casinos will have even more difficulty trying to prevent their establishment on island.

If voter turn out is low, however, the counts won't be quite as persuasive. And if there isn't a clear majority one way or another, heaven help us all! **It's critically important, therefore, that people do go cast their vote - that everyone make sure his/her voice is heard on the question of whether Saipan should have one or more casinos.** Voting will take place on Friday, November 4, Citizenship Day, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Kagman Community Center (Precinct 5), the Multipurpose Center in Susupe (Precinct 2 and 3A), the legislature building on Capital Hill (Precinct 4A, 4B, 4C and 4D) and at NMC classroom D1 (Precinct 1A, 1B, and 1C). Voters are asked to bring some identification with them. Early voting will be available on Wednesday, November 2, and Thursday, November 3, from 8:00 a.m. to noon, in classroom D1 at NMC for those unable to come to the polls on November 4. Unfortunately, there wasn't time or funding to provide for off-island voters.

It's long been said that the media are not the most reliable source of information. For example, according to a report on NBC's Nightly News, a mass of debris from the recent Japanese tsunami - reportedly twice the size of the state of Texas - has been sighted in the Pacific Ocean floating towards the U.S. west coast. The report said the debris is predicted to reach Midway Island in January of 2012, the U.S. west coast in 2013, Hawaii on the current's return westward flow in 2014-2015, and the CNMI in 2015 or 2016. The broadcast is available at < http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/45023837#45023837?from=en-us_msnhp>1=43001 >.

What the NBC reporters apparently did not know is that there is already a body of floating debris in the Pacific, largely composed of plastics, that is stuck in what is known as the northern gyre, and it is this patch of garbage that has been said to be twice as large as the state of Texas. See < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Pacific_Garbage_Patch > . Which brings up the possibility that the tsunami debris - or at least most of it - will, instead, join the existing patch of trash already out there, rather than reach either the U.S.'s western shore or Hawaii or the CNMI.

Then there's a more local example: a story about 'really winning \$2.5 million at the Tinian casino' that reads, "...the winner is a Korean taxi driver on Saipan....He and a female companion tried their luck at the recently held baccarat challenge at Tinian Dynasty but were unsuccessful. He was eliminated at the semi-finals"; though his partner made it to the final table, she did not win the major prize, the article says. Puzzling, at best.

It's also unclear whether the confusing stories about what's happening at CHC are due to administrative uncertainty as to who is in charge of what, to garbled information being provided to the media, or to the media's presentation thereof, but here too it would seem prudent to be a bit skeptical of it all.

As an aside, it would, in fact, be prudent to be skeptical not only of present reports related to CHC, but about the future of CHC itself. Today's *Marianas Variety* editorial raises foreboding questions about how much experience the newly formed health corporation's trustees have in running a hospital, what kind of a record they have in supporting/promoting the public interest as opposed to just having a lengthy government employment history, whether they have pre-existing business connections that would compromise their ability to make impartial decisions.

In any case, though the media is a ready source of a great deal of good information, the caution still holds that not everything one reads in the paper is necessarily true.

It's all very well and good to propose increasing the punishment of those who steal from tourists, as Representative Edmund S. Villagomez has done in his recently drafted H.B. 17-236, and Ramon S. Basa did in his earlier H.B.17-198. The urge to bear down on such criminals is understandable, given the recent rash of tourist thefts, and the importance of tourist welfare to the CNMI's economy.

But judging from the seeming increase in thefts in general, the number of repeat arrests and convictions, and the light sentences being handed down, maybe it's time to re-assess the schedule of crimes and punishments for theft, robbery, stealing, larceny - whatever the term, the taking of others' property - in general.

However, it should also be born in mind that research shows that jail time does not seem to be an effective deterrent to further crime. Rather, increased effort is needed to rehabilitate criminals so that they become productive members of society. A more direct and effective way of protecting tourists would be to provide a greater security presence at tourist sites, and by educating the general public to be more aware and solicitous of tourists and their welfare.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services has just issued an update that provides for parole status for caregivers. But it doesn't work for me, and I can imagine it won't for a lot of others either. Somehow or other, the USCIS still doesn't understand the facts of life, or the economy here. Foreign workers who have lived on island a long time have developed a means of survival that contributes substantially to the welfare of the entire CNMI, but it doesn't fit into the neat categories of allowable practices of which the USCIS is so fond.

Many foreign workers not only have more than a high school education, they have, in addition, become very versatile, flexible, knowledgeable, in applying their abilities in myriad ways. They've put together a life for themselves that allows them to survive by working part time -

doing different things for different people. My caregiver was once a store owner. She also sells flowers. My friend's gardener has an engineering background and does occasional maintenance and repair work. Another houseworker I know also manages another employer's house maintenance and repair and baby-sits yet another employer's child.

All three of these face the possibility of having to leave Saipan because the system brought in by USCIS simply doesn't fit. They'd need three separate employers to each fill out an application for CW status to justify their staying on Saipan. The category of employment would not be the same across the three employers, since the workers do different things for each of them. The employers, in turn, balk at the high cost of the process for an employee who only works part-time.

In a manner of speaking, these workers hold together the fabric of life on island. If they are forced to leave on November 27, 2011, the effect on the CNMI will be very noticeable in very short order. The simplest, and most equitable solution is to give these long term workers improved status that would allow them to stay in the CNMI, as was recommended in the GAO report to the Department of Interior.

But Homeland Security is obviously not communicating with the Department of Interior, nor is the Department of Interior talking to the Department of Homeland Security, more's the pity.

In the meantime, we wish the participants of Saipan's version of "Occupy Wall Street" well. At least their presence keeps the issue visible, on the table.

The *Marianas Variety* reported at some length in yesterday's paper on a trip just taken by Marianas Public Land Trust trustees to Manila to attend the annual Pacific Region Investment Conference. The trip serves as part of the continuing education required if they are to effectively meet their fiduciary responsibilities as investment managers for MPLT, said chairman Alvaro A. Santos.

One wonders whether the Retirement Fund has ever sent its Board members to similar events. And whether the RF Board members were absent only because funds were lacking. For surely they should also have been at the conference where everything from managing risks and selection of investment managers to defined contribution retirement plans and investment portfolio management were on the agenda.

Sadly enough, if Retirement Fund Board members had gone, there were sure to have been outcries of protest about the waste of money by irresponsible travel-happy fun-seekers. Yet it is exactly this type of education that is needed, not only by RF Board members but also by the members of the legislature who continue to refuse to understand the dilemma the Board faces as they sit on the repeal of the Derivative Beneficiary Act.

Protests by the opposition - i.e., Michael Dotts, et. al. - notwithstanding, the DBA has had a catastrophic effect on the Fund's investments. To believe, as Dotts would have it, that it is within the power of the RF to overcome that harm with the DBA still in effect is naive indeed.

Short takes:

- American Memorial Park's Halloween "Trunk or Treat" program is not unique to the CNMI. Many communities on the "mainland" also conduct trunk or treat programs. Google shows events taking place as early as 2006. But not all reactions are favorable. Apparently, on the mainland, many are conducted by church groups, and are seen as proselytizing, or as deliberate attempts to discredit the notion of ghosts, ghouls and other Hallowe'en-related superstitions. The AMP program, however, seems to grow in popularity every year. This year it will be held on Monday, October 31, from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the AMP parking lot. Participants can begin setting up cars/trucks at 2:00 p.m. Though no costume prizes will be given, there will be a prize for best-decorated trunk. The event is open to all.

- One version of the casino bill that has been bouncing back and forth in the legislature proposed that whoever won the right to establish a casino pay a \$10M license fee up front, and that the revenue earned by the casino should be given to the Retirement Fund. That's backwards! The \$10M should be given to the Retirement Fund, and the revenue earned be allotted to wherever that \$10M was slated to go.