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An ardent supporter of casino gambling in the CNMI has said that the turnout in last week's straw poll on the issue - in which only 841 people voted, with 425 opposed and 416 in support - proves that 97% of the people, in effect, either voted yes or did not care

. As is always true with figures, though, there is another way to interpret that data. If one assumes that the pro-casino forces did not leave it entirely to chance, but did make some effort to get out the pro-casino vote, the fact that they were not able to muster more than 416 votes of support - not even enough to come out ahead in the total count - speaks for itself.


The unanswerable question though is why so few turned out, when feelings do seem to be strong on both sides of the issue. How much was due to the changes in voting venues, in voters having to drive, rather than walk, to cast their vote? How much was due to what Representative Stanley T. Torres labeled as "apathy"? Apathy in the sense of not caring, or apathy in the sense of resignation - that what one said wouldn't matter, wouldn't change the outcome? Certainly there was enough publicity. Enough clarity on the issue.

We join the many others who have heaped praise on Sam McPhetres and his students for a task carried out effectively, efficiently, fairly, with good manners and good humor.

Given the outcome, McPhetres and his students might not want to take on anything similar for some time to come, but just in case they're looking for new challenges (!), here's one they might consider: a census of the local labor pool. Much has been made of the failure of local businesses to hire local residents, but also of the lack of qualified workers in the local labor pool. Just how many warm bodies are out there looking for work? How much work are they looking for? What kind of work? What are their qualifications? What training do they have? How much education? How realistic are their expectations? How many valid, bona fide matches are there between openings and available bodies?

To take it one step further, how much training would it require to bring the labor pool up to the level required by the available positions? What kind of training? How much education? In what fields, categories? Does anyone really know? Does any data out there provide any answers?

Without hard data, the rhetoric about ignoring the availability of local labor, about bias in hiring practices, about unfairness and discrimination is just that - empty rhetoric.

Not so empty rhetoric is a new word that has appeared here and there: Ineptocracy (in-ep-toe--ra-cy). According to one scribe, it means a system of government where the least capable to lead are elected by the least capable of achieving, and where the members of society least likely to succeed or even to sustain themselves, are abundantly rewarded with goods and services paid for by the confiscated wealth of a diminishing number of producers. Or to put it another way, "a

system of government where people who are unqualified to do the job are elected by people without jobs, who are sustained by taxes collected from people who do have jobs." A rather cynical perspective, but can one deny that some aspects of life in the CNMI do resemble what an ineptocracy might look like?

An example: the latest directive on working hours issued by the governor contains the following: "Employees are prohibited from timing in or out outside the official office hours of 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.....If you come in early for work or from lunch, relax or visit with friends until it is time to time in. Time in at your scheduled work time and take your full hour for lunch, and time out...at the end of your work schedule. Everyone should be able to time in or out within a minute or so of the exact time....Extra time worked without authorization ... must be viewed as a disciplinary problem." There's more about not being allowed to make up from one day to the next or one week to the next any shortage of time worked, and pay cuts for every 15 minutes of unexcused absences, etc. Draconian-sounding measures that sure don't do much to inspire a positive work ethic!

Also sort of Draconian, as a matter of fact, are the USCIS regulations that require a small restaurant, for example, that consists of one cook, one waitress and perhaps one accountant to spend as much money to obtain work permits for its employees as does a larger restaurant that employs several cooks and waitresses in addition to the accountant. Or a small mom & pop store that has only one sales clerk/cashier to spend as much as a much larger store that has three or four cashiers. Proportionately speaking, the small businesses pay a high penalty for hiring foreign workers, where the larger ones, though they pay an identical amount in USCIS fees, can apportion that cost over a much larger sales figure.

Not only does that erode the existing economy, where many small stores served to provide the CNMI with a broad diversity of choices - in restaurants, in local grocery stores, in specialty shops like the shoe maker who has already closed shop - but it also serves as a major deterrent to anyone trying to open a new venture.

In that regard, the CNMI seems to be working hand in hand with the USCIS - doing everything it can to hurt the economy, to discourage businesses. Take the new \$15 per passenger fee that the CNMI will now charge each airline that brings in passengers from foreign countries, which has just become Public Law 17-58. The increase is bound to be reflected in higher air fares, and may well serve to reduce traffic to the CNMI. Wouldn't it have been better to find something to develop on Saipan, Rota, Tinian that would tempt the traveler to spend an extra \$15 while s/he was here (which would allow the money to stay in the CNMI, by the way)?

Or take the Commonwealth Development Authority's Qualifying Certificate program that provides new businesses with exemptions from various taxes in exchange for their investment in the CNMI, which legislators are now saying should be abolished.

On the other hand, the CNMI is also paying travel agents an extra bonus for every passenger they bring to the CNMI. Doesn't the one sort of cancel out the other? In the meantime, the hoops one

must jump through to open a business in the CNMI keep multiplying, and keep getting more and more difficult to get through. The CNMI in general, the USCIS, if there's any sincerity to its goal of supporting the CNMI economy, and the CNMI administration and legislature in particular, should be focusing on how to make businesses feel more welcome, how to help them set up/establish their businesses, how to smooth the path, rather than throwing more and more roadblocks in the way. One cannot help but wonder if any of the legislators has ever run a business - or even know anyone who does.

In contrast, the Chamber of Commerce, which is made up of businessmen, has been offering a series of workshops at little or no cost to prospective and current business owners on the various aspects of opening, financing, and operating a business. Maybe the legislators should take lessons?

Just to close the circle: not being able to avail myself (reporters: please note the reflexive pronoun!) of the provision for caregivers that the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services has devised, my only alternative for getting the help I need (see last week's column) appeared to be to hire my caregiver as a houseworker. But since the USCIS has ruled out houseworkers as eligible for work permits, I have had to find a "u-drive" and obtain her services indirectly. For reasons too complicated to go into here, in order to keep the caregiver who's been with me for nearly a year, that "u-drive" will now cost me an additional \$2.85/hr surcharge on top of the \$5.05/hr minimum wage that I had been paying her.

What with a fixed income, Medicare fees about to increase, and a retirement pension about to collapse - which will mean an increase in both health and life insurance that the recently announced small increase in Social Security does not begin to cover - that surcharge is no minor matter. And when I inevitably am going to need care beyond the one day a week with which am now able to survive, that \$2.85/hr is going to become very costly very quickly.

Even in this case, though the USCIS might have meant well in its decision not to provide for housekeepers as eligible for work permits, the alternative doesn't really solve the problem. It may decrease the amount of abuse that has taken place in the past, but only because fewer people will be able to afford housekeepers, not because the nature of the situation has changed. The "u-drive" companies - through whom the housekeepers are to be paid - are just as capable of withholding pay, of depriving housekeepers of their rights, as were the employers when workers were paid directly. And those employers, who are now contracted with "u-drive" companies, are just as capable of keeping false records, not reporting over-time worked, or demanding work not contracted for, as when they did not have to go through a third party.

USCIS has made it more difficult for people to obtain household help; it has made it more difficult for houseworkers to find employment - especially those who did part-time housework for several employers every week, rather than full-time for only one employer; it has raised the cost to the employer, and reduced the income to the workers (since the workers will now presumably be required to pay at least a share of their health insurance, workman's compensation and repatriation costs - which had not been true heretofore). And whom has it helped? How

much has it helped? It's not at all clear that it has helped anyone at all - except the "u-drive" agencies.....

Short takes:

All those casino supporters busy trying to out figure out whether to charge interested investors both a multi-million dollar application fee **and** a million dollar license fee - and what to do with, where to spend those monies - still haven't satisfactorily answered the question of just who they think is going to come gamble at the casino, where they're going to come from or how they are going to get here. Almost seems like they don't care, like they're not looking beyond the up-front money.