

1/6/12

The New Year usually brings hope, expectations, promise. This year, here in the CNMI, sad to say, that would appear not to hold true - at least not according to the *Saipan Tribune* poll which reported on 12/27/11 that only 14% of the respondents were very optimistic that 2012 would be better than 2011; only 20% were moderately optimistic, and fully 66% were not optimistic at all. And truth to tell, there isn't much on the horizon that holds out hope. The reports of investors planning to develop over a million square meters of land in Marpi, of enthusiastic reactions to Saipan's potential by visiting businessmen, of accessible geothermal resources on Saipan, even some of Kilili's promises of possible increased federal funding, are all just so much talk, unsupported by the reality of a seemingly deliberately deaf and blind administration, a largely focus-less and unimaginative legislature, an apathetic peoples.

Both local papers printed former Chief Justice Jose Dela Cruz' article last week about the "...need for reflection and action" where he described, what is "wrong" with the CNMI, and in some detail, what is needed to fix it. Unfortunately, he stopped short of describing just how one would go about doing so.

As Tony Pellegrino keeps pointing out in his column in the *Trib*, it isn't that resources aren't available. They are, but the will, the ingenuity, the determination to make use of them, seems to be lacking. As does a "vision" - a goal - one that goes beyond food on the table, affordable power and gas for the car, and provides the inspiration, the drive, the desire, to BE productive, to get off one's duff and out of the box, to make a commitment to seeing that things change.

There have been many attempts to define a vision for the CNMI - the Chamber did one nearly a decade ago, various local summits and conferences have attempted to do so, and so have smaller groups here and there. None has succeeded in putting together a vision that was able to gather more support than that of its originators. None has been inclusive enough to take into account or appeal to all - or even the majority - of the interests represented by the many sectors that make up the Commonwealth.

One of the biggest problem has been that the vast range of feasibilities, options, choices, has never been well presented during any of the discussions. Most visions have focused on known horizons - on the extant/ familiar conditions and life-style in the CNMI. There has been no look at alternatives in housing styles and architectural designs, for example, or at alternative mass transit/transportation systems, ocean-front usages, dispute resolution mechanisms, education formats, life-style options, penal systems, land usage choices, tourism programs.....

Who would organize discussions on defining a CNMI vision, who would lead them, how one would even get started, is another challenge. The churches? the schools? the Chamber of Commerce? All three? A grass-roots organization, similar, perhaps, to the Occupy Wall Street model?

Theoretically, the legislature could play a role here, but at present political constraints would seem to rule that out.

On the other hand, if one can survive until November, one good thing just might come forth in the year 2012. Elections will be held in November, and all seats in the House of Representatives are open, as well as three in the Senate - one from each island. The elections offer an opportunity to make a major change in the "climate" of the CNMI - provided appropriate candidates are willing to run, provided the electorate is willing to support them.

The coconut wireless has it that many likely candidates are reluctant to run, given the nature of present practices at the legislature. But there's nothing that says newly elected legislators couldn't

change those practices. The key is to make it obvious, early and loudly, that such "reform" candidates would get strong support.

The "bottom line," once again, is the electorate itself - those who go to the polls, and mark their ballots. The "tipping point" that Frank Stewart's letter to the editor in both papers today talks about may well be how many people are willing to break with tradition, decide change is needed, and not only find and encourage bright, capable and knowledgeable candidates to run for office, but also support them once elected.

Though the future does not look so promising at the moment, there is hope down the road - provided people are willing to make it a reality.

Both papers reported today the "pre-release" of CNMI Census 2010 data at the village level, with the *Marianas Variety* giving actual numbers for 125 "villages," no less. According to the CNMI's Statistics Division, despite its name, the release constitutes an official report from the Census Bureau. Thus, it starts the clock set by Article II, Section 4(a) of the CNMI Constitution which states the legislature must re-apportion the seats in the House of Representatives within 120 days following publication of census results. It would, thus, behoove the legislature to add re-apportionment to the list of priorities that its leadership, according to a report in the *Variety*, is scheduled to draw up next week.

With a reduction of 13.6 percent in the overall population figures, that would appear to call for a reduction of 2.72 members of the House. Which raises the question: how are such fractions supposed to be dealt with? Does that mean the House would be reduced by 3 members (the .72 being more than half), or only 2? In either case, it would represent at least a token cut in the over-all CNMI budget - welcome, however small.

It probably won't take the prize as the weirdest act passed by the CNMI legislature, but the law allowing the new Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation to take over land ownership in order to earn income sure has to be a serious contender. CHC's function is to administer health care for the CNMI. It is already beset with problems, from inadequate funding to a shortage of doctors and staff to outdated equipment and facilities - among other things - and an inexperienced board to deal with it all. It doesn't need yet another function totally outside its realm added to its responsibilities. One can only imagine how successful the CHC would be in that regard..... It is the Department of Public Land's function to administer the CNMI's public lands. If the property that it has now turned over to CHC has such a high potential for earning revenue, why is it that DPL has not found an investor, and turned it into an income-generating operation long since? What is there about CHC that would let anyone believe that it could do better than DPL? If revenue is the issue, that could easily be resolved by passing a law that provides that any revenue earned by DPL from that particular piece of land be designated as income to CHC. At least with DPL in charge, one should be able to count on all its purported expertise in land management, all its supposed experience in dealing with leases, investors, and developers - none of which is required of, or known to be held by, CHC management and staff.

The same argument holds true in relation to Senate Legislative Initiative 17-13, which would turn over to the Retirement Fund "free-hold fee simple title" to all golf courses in the CNMI for

as long as the government owes the RF employee payments. Trustees to the RF are not appointed for their knowledge of or experience in real estate/land management matters, nor are staff with that expertise on board. It makes no sense to burden the RF with new responsibilities when it is all it can do to cope with existing ones. If those golf course leases are indeed so remunerative, wouldn't it be much simpler if the legislators passed a law mandating that all profits be turned over to the RF? That would allow the DPL to do what is supposedly knows best, and allow the RF to concentrate on its primary mission.

Equally weird is the suggestion that has been made that the Marianas Public Land Trust waive its constitutional requirement to turn its interest earnings over to the General Fund and instead turn them over to CHC for the next six years. Those interest earnings have been funding CNMI government operations. Though one could argue that CHC had been a "government operation" in the past, CHC now is, purportedly, a private concern, and taking that money from the General Fund would leave a considerable gap in government revenue. That would not really appear to resolve either CHC's revenue shortfall, or the CNMI's budget deficit.

Short takes:

- The suggestion by one legislator that honor scholarships be reduced in order to be "fair" to all scholarship recipients is another candidate for weirdness. Complaints are rampant throughout the CNMI that too few of its professionals are indigenous, and much is made of those who manage to earn professional degrees - medical, legal, educational and the like. Yet to reach those levels takes many years of dedicated study, and many thousands of dollars. The CNMI will only acquire more of those among its populace if it is willing to support them along the long road to get there. Cutting their funding is exactly the wrong thing to do.

- Also weird is the opposition voiced by a municipal councilman in opposition to Mayor Donald Flores' announcement that his office would no longer provide picnic tables to the community. It was ok when funds were available, the Mayor said, but that funding is no longer available. And as any prudent person knows, when funding becomes short, one cuts out the "give-aways" and extras. This way, the private sector is encouraged to take over what should never have been a government function in the first place, and to argue otherwise is, well, just plain weird!

- Far less weird, in terms of seeking revenue to solve the CNMI's problems, would be to pursue the millions of dollars owed the CNMI that have been uncovered by the Public Auditors's office - some \$6.2 million, at last count. Data has already been collected, the debts are real, and all it would take is some enforcement effort from the office of the Attorney General. Wouldn't it make more sense for the legislature to explore that alternative rather than playing the shell game it's been playing?

- The CNMI should not 'take it personally' that businesses are closing in today's economy. The same is true across the mainland, with really big chains like Macy's Bloomingdales, and Best Buy also closing some of their stores. It's a national phenomenon, not merely a local one - if that's any comfort.....

. Last but not least, kudos to the Saipan Tribune Inc. for its most recent issue of *Taga Sports*, which features CNMI's young sports stars. What a great, well-deserved, supportive tribute!