

3/30/12

Those who may have caught the discrepancy and been confused about the conflicting stories in the papers regarding CUC's financial state should know that the picture is not nearly as muddled as it may appear. This past Wednesday's *Saipan Tribune* reported that CUC faced a \$9M operating loss for FY 2012. A week prior, the *Trib* had reported that CUC's books would show a projected revenue of \$45.6M, with a "positive income revenue" for FY 2013 of some \$2,497,406.

Asked how CUC could go from a \$9M shortfall to a net operating income of nearly \$2.5M in a single year, Charles Warren, CUC's Chief Financial Officer, wrote, in an e-mail, "We anticipate eliminating the shortfall in 2013 through a combination of higher revenues (via the recent rate increases in January of this year), better expense control and additional grants.

"The budget we are using for FY2012 anticipated revenues that did not materialize; however expenditures had already been committed, thus the loss. The FY2013 budget is much more conservative."

Would that other agencies could do as well!

Complaints were aired - quite justifiably, IMHO, as they say (that stands for "In My Humble Opinion" in twittertalk) - that Covenant Day, observed this past Monday, did not receive the formal recognition that it rightly deserves. In fact, embarrassingly enough, even this column overlooked the occasion this year.

There was a party at one of the pavilions along Beach Road, but that was a political gathering of the Covenant Party. The confusion in trying to make and maintain the distinction between the Covenant and the Covenant Party - as well as the bad taste in the mouth left by taking the word "Covenant" and using it as a political label - is most unfortunate. Though it was not said aloud at the time, taking "Covenant" as a party name constitutes, in fact, a sign of disrespect for the CNMI's Covenant and should never have been tolerated.

However, it would not take all that much to remedy the situation. Logically, it would fall to the governor's press secretary to make sure a formal statement from the governor was issued for the occasion (this year he was not even on island) - one that reminded people of the significance of the Covenant and honored those who created it. Various agencies and institutions could be encouraged to develop appropriate programs as well, along the lines of the forums and debates that have been held in the past. Perhaps school curricula should also be re-vamped - to include recognition of the Covenant's significance at all grade levels.

A second, more radical and perhaps more therapeutic remedial step would be to find a new name for the present "Covenant" party, and give the word back its original focus in the local milieu as pertaining to the document that commemorates the agreement between the U.S. and the CNMI. It was, after all, Governor Fitial's party. With his abandonment of the party, there's no need to retain the name he gave it. Under new leadership, it deserves a new name. One could call it the "Progressive" Party, or the "Commonwealth" Party, or the "Commonwealth Progressive Party." Something more fanciful: the Our Land, Sea and Air (OLSA) Party, or Progress in Partnership Party, or Turning the Tide (TTT) Party, or Let's Work Together (LWT) Party. Of course, one could call it the Independent Party - and gather all the mavericks as well.....

A more long-standing complaint often aired has to do with the money spent by government in off-island travel. Many people view off-island travel as a bonanza, a frivolous expenditure of funds, a downright waste. Off-island travel should be banned, they say. On the other hand, there are frequent complaints that CNMI's problems are due to the lack of experience in its leaders. But how are they supposed to learn, to gain experience?

Some off-island travel is for the purpose of attending seminars, workshops, training sessions. Presuming that the off-island travelers actually attend these sessions, and take them seriously, they can be invaluable. And the more so, if attendees return and share what they've learned with their co-workers.

There's no question it's expensive - beginning with the airfare to get there and back, the hotel fare while there, and the training fees. Sometimes costs can be cut by obtaining grants or scholarships for attendance at such training sessions. Having workshop sponsors travel to the CNMI and holding the training sessions on island is another way to cut costs. But that depends on how many people are to be trained, how many trainers there are, how much equipment is involved, how much time is needed.

Another alternative, that perhaps is not yet fully utilized on island, is to make use of on-line webinars. These provide instruction and training via the web. It would not be necessary to travel, nor to bring personnel in. The training could be done on-site, in the CNMI - for a single individual, or for a group. Granted, it takes time and search skills to find such opportunities. Is this an area where some enterprising individual, some entrepreneur, could sell his/her services as identifier, locator, of appropriate webinars for agencies and individuals seeking training?

To condemn all off-island travel as wasteful is short-sighted. It all depends on its purpose - and the outcome.

It hasn't made it to the CNMI yet, so it can only be described in the words of others, but Robert and Gigi York's long-awaited book, *Slings and Slingstones: The Forgotten Weapons of Oceania and the Americas*, has finally made it to amazon.com - though not to Kindle, yet. The 244-page book, described by publisher Kent State University Press as "well-documented, bountifully illustrated and thoroughly researched", and as an outstanding new archaeological survey, "unveils the significant role [that] slings and slingstones played in developing societies."

Co-author Robert York notes that "This is a unique and thoroughly researched work on a rather arcane subject -- the archaeology and ethnohistory of slings and slingstones in Oceania and the Americas" and that it is the only one of its kind.

Friends and museum-goers may remember that Robert and Gigi York served as Collection Curators for the NMI Museum in the early 2000's; Gigi also served briefly as Museum Director. They currently serve as fellows of the University of Wyoming's Frison Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology in Laramie. They also hold research associate appointments at the Nevada State Museum in Carson City.

Short takes:

- Another book of local interest that hasn't made it to the CNMI yet - it was only released this week - is noted author and frequent island visitor Fred Kluge's newest book, *The Master Blaster*.

All about Saipan, it has received a glowing review from the *N.Y. Times*: <

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/26/books/the-master-blaster-by-p-f-kluge.html?_r=1 >.

- Yet another noteworthy book - of perhaps more narrowed interest but still worth reading - is *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire* by Rafe Esquith, a fifth-grade teacher whose innovative classroom activities have won him national recognition. Esquith spells out many of them in his book, in almost every subject a fifth grade teacher normally covers. Students come to school early, work over lunch, stay after school to take advantage of all he offers, including learning of a second language, putting on a Shakespearean play annually, creating string sculpture, producing their own books. His book is available on loan from the JoeTen Kiyu Public Library; ideally, copies would be available in every school for easier teacher access.

. - A movie to look forward to is the one planned by George Cameron about his dive last week to the bottom of the Marianas Trench. According to a news report in today's *Trib*, the movie could be ready late this year or early next year. Too bad there isn't some way the CNMI could benefit more directly than just having the word "Marianas" become more well-known.

- There's been much in the national news about the decline in civility in politics. Wouldn't it be nice if the local media helped civility recover here and simply stopped repeating every "sling and arrow" shot off by uncivil politicians?

- Last but not least: whatever happened to the prevailing wage survey that the CNMI government was supposedly conducting?