

10/12/12

It's less than a month before the election, and only today have a few ads begun to appear in the newspapers for some of the candidates. There's still not been a word in the papers about where to go to vote, who else is running in what district, what else is on the ballot, and what the ballot will look like, much less any kind of educational material on the three amendments to the CNMI Constitution that are said to be on the ballot. That seems to be cutting it close - even for a place where people aren't known for planning ahead. One would think the candidates - and both opponents and proponents for the amendments - would want more exposure. Besides, public education is mandated by the Constitution. Yet the ballots appear to be already drawn up, since some of the candidate posters include the candidate's number on the ballot.

On the web, it's a different matter. On the Election Commission website < [www.votecnmi.gov.mp](http://www.votecnmi.gov.mp) > there's everything you might want to know and then some. It has maps of the districts. It lists the candidates per district. It lists the polling places. It has a pamphlet for voters and a pamphlet for candidates. It has a sample ballot. It provides access to the text of the proposed initiatives, and summaries of what is being proposed in three languages: Chamorro, Carolinian and English. It's well laid out. It's easy to use. It appears to be all there. The explanation of the initiatives is not lengthy, but is clear and well-written. There's only one thing missing: a discussion of the pros and cons for the amendments - surely an integral part of any "education" program

. All of which doesn't help those without access to computers.

And is yet another example of well-kept secrets. Why hasn't there at least been a notice in the papers that all that information is available on the web?

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According to the coconut wireless, both the Retirement Fund's Trustee ad Litem and the Retirement Fund itself are considering challenging Public Law 17-82, the law that allows present members of the Retirement Fund to withdraw all their holdings and still keep their jobs with government. The law even provides that the members be paid interest, and would likely spell the end of the Retirement Fund, since it would drain a considerable amount of capital from the Fund's rapidly shrinking assets.

At the very least, the law should also have allowed the Retirement Fund to keep a certain percentage of those monies as compensation for the expenses the Fund incurred in keeping the monies secure, in investing the monies so they generate interest, in managing the monies so that records concerning those transactions are available, reliable and complete. At the risk of angering present Retirement Fund members, this retiree wishes they'd hurry up and file the suit to stop implementation of the law.

It's not fair to short-change one group and not the other (retirees and present Fund members). If cuts to benefits are to be made, both groups should share in the pain. It's painful enough to know that there's yet been no re-structuring of the plan that would put a stop to the many over-generous payments still being made every month.

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To go, in a manner of speaking, from the ridiculous to the sublime, the United Nations held a press conference last month to announce that it had given an award to the tiny Micronesian nation of Palau, long a leader in the promotion of ecological and environmental conservation. Palau received the 2012 Future Policy Gold Award for two outstanding marine policies it has adopted: the Protected Areas Network Act in 2003, and, more recently, the Shark Haven Act in 2009. Silver Awards were given to the Philippines and Namibia for their Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park Act (2010) and Namibia's Marine Resources Act (2000).

The UN's 2012 Future Policy Award highlights the challenges faced by the world's oceans as well as exemplary solutions to protect them. Says an accompanying press release: Palau's policies are "politically bold and tailored to the needs of local people and the environment. Their effects are being felt globally and they have inspired regional legislation in neighboring countries. Palau's Shark Haven Act of 2009 is a milestone. It was the first of its kind and will serve to protect over a hundred species of deep water and reef sharks in Palau's waters." At risk because some are indiscriminately slaughtered, sharks are, nonetheless, critical to the maintenance of a balanced food chain in marine ecosystems.

The further effect of the Palauan declaration has been powerful. A number of other countries including Honduras, the Maldives and the Bahamas have since enacted similar laws and banned shark fishing in their national waters.

Palau's Protected Area Network established a countrywide system of connected protected areas including fringing reefs, lagoons, a sardine sanctuary and mangroves. Local communities and states manage these in the traditional fashion, but with added financial, technical and institutional support from the government. To date, 35 protected areas have been designated, with a goal of protecting 30 percent of the near-shore marine environment and 20 percent of the terrestrial environment by 2020.

Short takes:

- Last week's column indicated that election day was November 7. That was incorrect. Election Day is Tuesday, November 6, and will be a holiday.

- Will the election make a difference in the conduct of the impeachment hearings? One reader suggested that if the vote on whether to impeach comes before the election, members of the House may feel forced to vote yes because of the pressure from their constituents; but if the vote comes after the election, those that lost will no longer need to worry about that pressure, and can try to protect themselves/cover their backsides by voting no.

- There's a saying about 'marrying in haste and repenting at leisure.' In the case of the 2013 budget one of the acts that was apparently done in haste to now be repented at leisure was the allocation of \$500,000 to Tony Pellegrino's Northern Marianas Trade Institute, which was line-item vetoed by the governor. The moneys come from fees related to Commonwealth-only worker renewals; the governor justified his act by claiming that since the amount of those monies isn't guaranteed, the funding availability is uncertain. That makes a certain amount of sense. Too bad the allotment couldn't have been worded to accommodate the irregular funding source. Let's hope it wasn't spent elsewhere and can be re-instated. The NMTI serves a much-needed function in the CNMI.

- In re-reading the budget news stories, we found this: "The governor noted the Legislature's decision to increase the Legislative Bureau's funding by \$401,704 with four new positions. This represents a 37.8-percent increase from his submission." Last week we had said neither the

amount of the increase in the legislative budget nor its use had been identified by the press. On the contrary, this item came from the *Saipan Tribune* in a story by intrepid reporter Haidee Eugenio. Our apologies!

- Word of caution: Those with access to their respective agency budgets might want to use some caution in committing its funds. It appears that the regular payment due the Retirement Fund by many of the government agencies was not included in the FY2013 budget on the false assumption that the Retirement Fund was already dead, and would not require matching employer funds in FY 2013. However, the Fund is still there, employees are still contributing, and their employer agencies should still be contributing their share as well. That money is still due, and will have to come from somewhere.....

- You'd think that if the same spots flood with every heavy rainfall, and the same spots spill enough eroded material over a main road to block one of the lanes, month after month, year after year, that eventually the responsible department would find a way to fix the problem other than by just going out and putting up traffic cones. So why haven't the problems with the road north of Lower Base - and there are bound to be others - been fixed yet?????

- The "holiday" of Commonwealth Cultural Day went by unnoticed, as did Labor Day last month. Will the same be true of Citizenship Day, on November 4th? No rallying, no parties, no inspirational messages, at the very least? Leader, where art thou?