

Commissioners: Possibly Some Job Definition Soon

By Susan Guffey
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Their job has been defined as everything from secular parish priest to Micronesian ward healer.

And according to the man who's spent a year studying their role, no one's more confused about the function of Guam's village commissioners than the commissioners themselves.

"They're at a loss as to just how they fit into the governmental structure," said Herman Sablan, special assistant to the chief commissioner.

The problem, Sablan said, is trying to work out 1974 problems under a 1951 system.

The village commissioner system was established just after passage of the Organic Act in 1950. At the time, the outline of the commissioner's official responsibilities was very broad, including even such duties as tracking down anyone in violation of public health regulations.

Another subsection of the statute dealing with commissioners gives the following duties: "Cooperate with all officials of the Government of Guam in order to promote health, education, peace and economic and social welfare of the people of his jurisdiction."

While such loose and nearly all-encompassing guidelines may have been just what the island needed more than 20 years ago, that system can't work today, Sablan said.

"There are too many people and too many different problems," he explained.

In 1950, Guam's population was just under 60,000. Today, it is nearly double that. The commissioner's place in governmental protocol system has been a major problem, too, Sablan said.

"They're elected, but they have no power except to lobby. If a commissioner has strong political influence, his constituents probably get more than the other villages."

Sablan and the commissioners sent a bill to the Legislature last November to remedy their limbo-like status. A public hearing on it is set for April 4.

The bill would create a Municipal Government Authority, consisting of the commissioners, assistant commissioners and the chief commissioner's office. Budgeting and public works scheduling would be centralized and a "more sophisticated position" would be spelled out for the commissioners.

Monday, Sablan and the commissioners will begin a series of seven half-day workshops to prepare themselves for their probable new roles. Included will be sessions on statutory authority, protocol, ethics, budgeting and "people relations"—how to say no when a constituent demands that a commissioner go beyond his bounds to solve problems.

And, according to Sablan, a major source of discussion should be the commissioner's role as a representative of the people.

"We want to show them that they don't have to fight the government just because they're representing the people.

"They are, after all, the grassroots level of that government."