

August 29, 1995

POST CONVENTION SUMMARY

Proceeds from Public Lands to Support New Council for Indigenous Affairs

The proceeds from leases of public lands will be channeled to programs to benefit Chamorros and Carolinians under the proposed amendments to the Constitution approved by the recently-concluded Constitutional Convention. "This amendment is one of the most important things we did in the Convention," said John Oliver DLR Gonzales, who was elected Secretary of the Convention and who is serving on the Post-Convention Committee. "We were able to ensure that the money from public lands will go to scholarships, medical referrals, and housing for our people, as well as for support of cultural activities."

The proposed amendments create a new Council on Indigenous Affairs, which was dubbed the "CIA" by the delegates, to combine the work of the Resident Executive for Indigenous Affairs and the Special Assistant for Women's Affairs. Both of these offices were taken out of the Constitution. The Council will have five members, appointed by the Governor for four year terms. The Council is given responsibility for educational and cultural programs to advance the knowledge and practice of Chamorro and Carolinian language, culture, and traditions; as well as acting as an advocate for the indigenous population and translating and distributing official and historic documents.

"We amended the constitutional provisions with respect to the Marianas Public Land Trust to direct the interest income from the Trust to programs for local people," explained Gonzales. Under that amendment, the Trust may spend up to 40% of the interest income for homestead mortgages and housing projects or for maintaining public parks, and remaining amounts would be available to the Council. Gonzales said "Once the Council gets the money from the Trust, it can decide how those funds should be allocated and, because it has a broad mandate, it can make sure the money goes where it is most needed."

The Council will also be supported by appropriations from the Legislature under the new amendments. Like any other agency, the Council will submit its budget indicating the support to come from the income from the Trust, and the additional funding needed to support the programs under its jurisdiction.

Tomas B. Aldan, a principal sponsor of the measure, said that the purpose of the new Council was to consolidate the government structure that focuses on the well-being of local

people, and at the same time to give the Governor flexibility with respect to how appointments would be made. "We took out the old requirements that could be met by someone who had lived most of their life in the States, and substituted the basic qualifications of background and capability in Chamorro or Carolinian language, customs and traditions," noted Gonzales. "This allows the Governor to pick the best qualified person from a broad range of candidates, but provides us with the assurance that it is going to be somebody who really knows what is needed in our community."

Felix R. Nogis, the chair of the Committee on Executive Branch and Local Government which prepared the amendment including the new Council, was concerned that Carolinian programs be expanded and supported. "Under the new Council, the Governor likely will appoint the Executive Assistant for Carolinian Affairs to be one of the five members of the Council," said Nogis. "The Constitution gives the Governor flexibility, because it does not require this appointment, but the available five seats on the Council provide a place for the Carolinian Assistant so that all programs for indigenous peoples can be coordinated." Nogis said that he was confident the new Council would be of great benefit to the Carolinian community. The Constitution provides for an executive director and a deputy director so that both Chamorros and Carolinians can be represented in the top management of these programs. "I expect that we will see the two positions rotated occasionally so that the executive director will be a Chamorro for some of the time and a Carolinian at other times," said Nogis.

The womens programs should also benefit under the new Council, according to Esther S. Fleming, the Vice Chair of the Post-Convention Committee. The Special Assistant for Women's Affairs likely will be a member of the five-person Council. "We provided in the Schedule on Transitional Matters that the Special Assistant for Women's Affairs will continue in operation for at least 12 months after the amendments are ratified," said Fleming. "Even though the constitutional provision specifying the office is deleted, the Governor can continue the office by executive order or the legislature can do so by law." Fleming pointed out that scholarships for women and housing for single women can be funded effectively as a part of a coordinated program to distribute the interest income from the Trust that the Council will have the broad-ranging jurisdiction to accomplish.

The Arts Council, also made a part of the new Council on Indigenous Affairs, asked for and got from the Convention a specific acknowledgment that any programs it administers under federal grants will be open to everyone in the Commonwealth so as to comply with federal requirements.

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Total number of pages sent (including cover sheet): 3

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MESSAGE:

Herman:

Here's another press release. More coming.

Deanne