



Saipan attorney calls Con-Con public education 'propaganda'

By V.C. AVENDAÑO

Saipan lawyer Steve Woodruff believes that the public education program being conducted by the Third Northern Mariana Islands Constitutional Convention's post-convention committee is little more than "propaganda."

Speaking as "a private citizen who happens to be trained in law," the Senate legal counsel lambasted the post-convention committee for coming out with "self-serving statements" and "misleading" promotion of amendments.

"From a personal point of view, I would say that the information provided to the public is definitely biased in favor of the amendments. I don't think it deserves the term public education. It's propaganda actually what they're doing," Woodruff said.

In the presentation of the amendments, Woodruff noted that the post-convention committee did not present any arguments against the proposals.

The public education program that the committee is conducting should be, Woodruff said, "balanced" — one that "provides accurate information and gives equal time for opposing views."

Section 23 of Public Law 9-18 — the convention's enabling act — says that the post-convention committee shall assist and coordinate with government officials

in providing public education regarding the effect of the proposed amendments to the CNMI Constitution.

"Arguably, it's up to their (the post convention committee's) discretion from a legal standpoint. I haven't researched the issue to find out whether there's case law that says that public education has to be unbiased or anything like that. From a legal standpoint I don't see anything wrong with what they are doing," Woodruff said.

The proposed changes in the constitution will be put in the ballot on March 2 in the form of 19 amendments, each amendment containing several subjects.

Woodruff questioned the legality of having several subjects lumped under one amendment.

"What the convention did was produce a new constitution. They voted mostly article by article as they went along, and they didn't have any vote at the end," he said.

"Because of the way that they voted, because of the way they signed the constitution, the fact that it was the post-convention committee that decided to put it in those form of 19 amendments to vote on, I have a question about whether it's legal for them to put the 19 amendments in that form," Woodruff said.

The Senate lawyer pointed out that Public Law 9-18 mandates that each amendment has to be limited to a single subject. In addition,

there is also a principle of law that deals with constitutional amendments that says an amendment is supposed to be limited to a single subject, he said.

"The convention itself did not decide they were going to vote on 19 amendments. If they had, maybe there wouldn't be a problem. But instead, it's the post-convention

committee doing that," Woodruff said.

He pointed out that Public Law 9-18 does not say that the post-convention committee can decide how to "package" the amendments.

Unless a court order is secured, there is nothing to prevent the post-convention committee from using the 19-amendment form

in the ballot, he said.

Post-convention committee chairperson Herman T. Guerrero criticized legislators and public officials who have voiced opinions against the proposed amendments.

Guerrero warned against possible misinterpretation by those who are "not well-versed" in the proposed amendments.

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