

THE PRESIDENT'S PAGE

February 27, 1996

by Herman T. Guerrero, Chair
Post Convention Committee

I have previously written about Amendment #6 on local government. Opposition to this amendment has been voiced by the Mayors of Rota and Tinian, who apparently do not want to share their powers with elected municipal councils which would have greater legislative authority under the amendment. The Post Convention Committee believes that voters on both islands will make up their own minds -- and recognize that enlarged responsibilities for local government will be necessary in the years ahead.

Some of the opposition on Saipan to Amendment #6 is more surprising and deserves a response. It has been contended, for example, that this amendment will result in local taxes imposed by local authorities that will duplicate Commonwealth taxes and drive us all into bankruptcy. What foolishness.

First, the Commonwealth Legislature retains the authority under Amendment #6 to decide what areas for legislation should be dealt with only on a Commonwealth-wide basis and what areas may be left to the discretion of the local governments. The Analysis (p.49) states:

“It remains the responsibility of the Commonwealth government to decide what subjects affecting all the citizens of the Commonwealth should be regulated by Commonwealth law and not by three (or four) different local governments within the Commonwealth.”

This applies to municipal ordinances designed to raise revenues and to all other types of municipal ordinances.

Second, the delegates believe that the local governments should have a wide range of discretion in deciding how to raise revenues to support their operations. Some types of fees and fines in the Northern Marianas have traditionally been left to municipal governments. Other new sources, such as taxes on casino operations as in Tinian, still hold promise for raising significant revenues in the future for local government. Other kinds of taxes, imposed as a matter of course in the States to support local government (such as property taxes or sales taxes), might someday have to be considered in the Commonwealth. Proposed Amendment #14 guaranties local government a share of any revenues from the exploitation of resources in its jurisdiction.

Third, Amendment #6 makes clear that no revenue-generating measure can be enacted by local government authorities without public hearings. Politicians the world over are leery of proposing new taxes and the threat of harsh taxes driving us into bankruptcy does seem a little unreal.

Fourth, Amendment #6 looks ahead to the time when local governments in the Commonwealth will perform substantial services for the residents of their islands. This is what the citizens of Rota and Tinian have urged for many years. But the delegates believed that “there is no free lunch” for local government in the Commonwealth anymore. If the citizens want local government, they should be prepared to pay for it through locally-raised revenues. This will take political leadership at all levels of government. The Commonwealth government should take the initiative and identify current taxing authority that could be delegated, at least in part, to the three municipal governments.

Amendment #6 reflects the financial realities of today. With a mounting deficit in the Commonwealth, new controls must be imposed to restrain the costs of government at all levels - including local government. This amendment provides a seven-year period for local governments to find new sources for revenue, if they wish to continue present staffing levels, so that the amount of Commonwealth funds currently used to support local government can be gradually reduced.

ROTA PARENTS' SUMMIT
DEBATES AMEND. #13

The Rota Parents' Summit meeting last Friday devoted part of their agenda to the proposed Amendment #13 that would change the governance of the public school system. A lively debate pitted former Lt. Governor Benjamin T. Manglona, one of the three delegates who refused to sign the product of the Convention's work, against three delegates who did sign, including Rota delegate Justo S. Quitugua, Board of Education member Esther S. Fleming, and Saipan delegate John Oliver DLR Gonzales.

Lt. Governor Manglona, who voted YES on Amendment #13 in the Convention, now opposes the amendment, citing the concerns of the Rota member and former Chairman of the Board of Education, Daniel Quitugua. John Oliver DLR Gonzales responded to the Lt. Governor with a strong speech saying that the people had asked for local self determination on education and the Convention had responded with locally elected school boards. Gonzales defended Amendment #13 saying that it was essential to the future of education in the Commonwealth, and citing the failures of the current system to serve parents and students.

Lt. Governor Manglona argued that putting the education bureaucracy under a Secretary of Education, who would be the Governor's appointee, would politicize the public school system. He referred to the concerns of the Board of Education that many jobs in the education bureaucracy would be filled on a political basis.

Board of Education member Esther Fleming responded that Amendment #13 was necessary to get control of schools into the hands of parents and teachers. Under Amendment #13, budget allocations would go directly to principals and would not be doled out by the bureaucracy. This would allow school-based management. School boards elected by Senatorial Districts would make sure that principals were responsive to the needs of the local community. Fleming argued that the education bureaucracy is too large, and not enough resources get down to the school level. Fleming said that public safety, public health, and other important government departments are headed by appointees of the Governor, and it would benefit the school system to have a cabinet member as its head.

Speeches and questions raised the issue whether Amendment #13 would restrict resources devoted to Rota schools because of the requirement that funds for instruction be allocated on a per enrolled student basis. Not so, said Rota delegate Justo S. Quitugua. The Convention delegates were careful to preserve the flexibility for the Legislature to enact special appropriations after it had provided the annual appropriation for instruction. These special appropriations would allow for particular needs on Rota and Tinian, said Quitugua, but they would be well defined so that everyone would understand how the system was being funded.

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ALDAN-PIERCE
CORRECTION

Dear Editor:

When you published my letter last week, you changed the source of the quote in the first paragraph to the Pacific Star. The quote about statements of principle came from an article in the NORTH STAR, not from the Pacific Star. The NORTH STAR article supported Amendment #1. The Pacific Star's columnist has been attacking Amendment #1.

Sincerely,

Marian Aldan-Pierce