

OPEN LETTER TO THE VOTERS ON
COMMENTS ON PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

Answer
for
STAR on
3/1/96!

I chaired the Committee on Executive Branch and Local Government during the Constitutional Convention, and I want to respond to the Pacific Star columnist's views on the proposed amendments to the Constitution.

When the Pacific Star's columnist did not show up at any of the first 10 public education meetings we had, we asked one of our staff to contact her in early February. I have never known a responsible journalist who is so isolated from the community that she would refuse to go to public meetings and would refuse to meet with elected officials about subjects on which she is writing so much in the press. The Pacific Star's columnist was in the parking lot at the Legislature during our public meeting there last week, but refused to come inside where three delegates were available to talk to her about how the proposed amendments work. One has to ask what kind of attitude could propel someone to take this strange position. Our citizens should certainly take this into consideration in evaluating this columnist's opinions.

And I want to point to the very strong attempt to steer voters in which this columnist is now engaging. When she started this series of articles on January 19, this columnist said to the public: "How one votes is nobody's business. It should be a private matter, known only to one's self and to God, so to speak. However, as the date for voting on the concon amendments approaches, it would seem a worthwhile exercise, nevertheless, to reveal how I intend to vote on each of the amendments." Now, in last week's article, she is saying, "Here's a piece of advice for those who still haven't decided what to do about the 19 amendments on the ballot: vote "no" on #18."

The Star's columnist apparently always intended to tell the voters how to vote on each amendment. That is, of course, her right so long as some newspaper is willing to print what she writes. Now at least she is being very clear about that intent.

Amendment #18

The Pacific Star's columnist just doesn't speak to the main points on Amendment #18.

Under the current system, there is no specified way in which changes to the Covenant are to be approved by the Commonwealth. We have seen many news stories recently about possible changes under the mutual consent clause. If there is no specified way to make these changes, perhaps the Governor can do this alone. Does the Star's columnist think this is a good idea? Amendment #18 provides a role for the Legislature and for the voters in this process.

Under the current system, a majority Commonwealth-wide and 2/3 of the voters in each of two Senatorial districts must approve a proposed amendment to the Constitution. If the approximately 800 voters on Tinian and the approximately 1200 voters on Tinian exercise this veto power, they can overcome the wishes of the approximately 8,000 voters on Saipan. Does

the Star's columnist think this is a good system? Does she understand that the U.S. Supreme Court has struck down such systems under the one man-one vote principle? Amendment #18 provides for a 60% majority Commonwealth-wide so everyone's vote counts the same.

Under the current system, the Legislature can vote to raise its own budget by enormous amounts and put that on the ballot without any notice, public hearings, or opportunity for public education. The Senate has just done it again, proposing two weeks ago an initiative that would raise the Legislature's budget to a whopping \$7 million per year. Does she think this is a good system? Amendment #18 provides that the Legislature, like anybody else, can put proposed amendments on the ballot by collecting the required number of signatures.

An initiative to amend the Constitution can be put on the ballot at any time. Amendment #18 makes this easier by reducing the number of signatures required to 30% of the registered voters. The Star's columnist says the Constitution cannot be amended for 25 years. That is not true. It can be amended any time the Legislature or anyone else can get the new lower number of signatures.

The Constitutional Convention delegates who, unlike the Star's columnist, were elected by the voters to propose amendments that are good for the Commonwealth, urge you to vote YES on Amendment #18.

Sincerely,

Felix R. Nogis
Delegate, Third Northern Marianas
Constitutional Convention