

On My Mind
By Ruth L. Tighe

It certainly was refreshing to see a government agency voluntarily disclose hard data about the costs of government operations - or at least one aspect thereof. It was more than refreshing to see the <I>Variety</I>, and then the <I>Tribune</I>, make that data available in such detail with their charts of comparative figures.

The Department of Finance apparently issued a news release this past week reporting on CNMI travel expenditures from 1997-8/31/99. The <I>Variety</I> carried the story first, complete with an easily readable chart showing expenditures over the three years for major executive agencies as well as other government offices.

Generally, government agencies are not all that forthcoming with useful information about their performance. Generally, they are even less forthcoming with useful information across agency lines. The only exception that comes to mind is the Office of the Public Auditor, which regularly issues reports on government agency performance. In this instance, though, the Finance Department went the Public Auditor one better by issuing a news release written for the public, rather than a more formal one aimed primarily at department heads.

It's odd, though, that this information was officially released. Who's grinding whose ax? Or, to put it another way, who's going whose ox?

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Besides revealing that the Office of the Governor has indeed cut travel expenses by an astounding 93.05%, the published chart also shows that, in contrast, the Legislature's travel expenses went up by 28.83% over the same period. Of the 18 government agencies listed, only one other showed an increase in travel expenses: the Rota Mayor's office, by a hefty 59.49%.

As the <I>Tribune</I> article reports - perhaps, appearing a day later, its reporter had more time to analyze the figures? - of the total 27 listings, only four others showed an increase in travel expenditures: the medical referral program, Little League Baseball (which competed in off-island competition), the Alien Deportation Fund, and Federal grant funds. The rest all showed a reduction in travel expenses, ranging from as little as 27.15% by the Public Auditor's Office to a high of 94.99% by the Department of Finance.

It seems more than a little ironic that the Legislature, which has taken such a strong stand on reducing executive agency budgets, is then so unresponsive and irresponsible when it comes to cutting its own budget. But it doesn't really come as much of a surprise.

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What did come as a surprise is the discovery that the UPS has an office on Saipan. I think I'd seen a UPS truck on occasion, but until it became an issue for me, the implications of that had

never really sunk in. But an issue it has become, and thus the discovery.

I'd finally decided to go ahead and order a new hard drive for my ailing computer. It took several leaps through bureaucratic hoops before I finally found the right source. Then there were some decisions - about size of memory, disk with or without imaging, and the like - and finally it came time to face the inevitable hassle of arranging for delivery.

Once again, I was told that without a house number, a street address, UPS would not deliver. Once again I argued that there weren't house numbers, or street addresses here, that everyone went to the post office, and that big names, like LL Bean, amazon.com, even Hammacher-Schlemmer, had figured out a way to get packages to us. The company should use Post Office Priority Mail, I suggested.

I was told to wait. On the company's time, that was ok with me - those 800 numbers are a real blessing! Finally, I was told that shipping could be arranged - at a cost of thirteen dollars and some change. Knowing that Priority Mail usually costs only \$3.50 or so, I asked why the cost was so high.

"Oh," replied the voice on the other end, "that's because I have to go to the post office myself to mail it, and we decided to charge extra for that service." Not knowing any better, I didn't argue.

That's when I found out UPS has an office here. I hadn't expected to find one listed in the phone book, but it was. The phone was even answered by a real voice. UPS does deliver on Saipan without a house number or a street name, the voice said. You do have to have an office name, and a building name. And you have to make sure that UPS has a phone or fax number for you so its staff can call if its driver has trouble finding you. The voice even claimed that stateside vendors would accept office and building names in lieu of house numbers and street addresses. I can't wait to try it out.

But I wish those involved with street naming would get on with it. Seems they need reminding that the purpose of naming streets is to make it possible to deliver services we're not getting now.

Like package delivery, or 911 service. And if getting the job done means upsetting someone's sense of symmetry, so be it. Symmetry is not a valid priority. Delivery of services is.

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I am continually surprised at how slowly mankind makes its way towards peace and civility. I am also embarrassed at the latest evidence thereof: the ruling by Israel's Supreme Court banning torture in interrogation, which was announced just this week. I did not expect that a people who had undergone so much suffering and torture could - or would - condone the deliberate use of torture on others.

The good news is that such torture has now been outlawed, at least in one of the many hot spots around the globe. The bad news is that there are so many, of which the slaughter in East Timor is but the latest. Ed Stephen's cynical argument that fighting breeds character notwithstanding,

the sooner peacekeeping forces can be brought in, the better. Though that's an oxymoron all it's own, isn't it - "peacekeeping forces."