

## On My Mind

11/27/99

A dislike, or distrust, of planning is one thing, but wholesale rejection of good decision-making is something else again. This column mentioned last week that given the biased, insensitive, dogmatic approach to planning practiced by most of the consultants who came to Micronesia during its formative years, it is hardly surprising that planning is a highly suspect activity here. But there's no rational explanation to be found for what appears to be a similar distrust of rational decision-making.

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Take the location of the proposed new high school, for example. According to media reports, the decision as to where to put it has been left up in the air until the Board of Education gets more input from legislators and the general public. Meaning no disrespect to members of the legislature, or the general public, what is it they are expected to know that the Board does not? Is a consultation with the legislators anything more than political game-playing?

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It doesn't take much imagination to come up with any number of criteria for determining where a new school should be located. Among them: where will most of the students come from? Where is there enough space? What is the state of the required infrastructure? Are roads in place? Power lines? Is enough water available in the area? What about waste disposal? What about traffic density? What will be the environmental impact? How much time will students (and teachers) have to spend traveling? Is the site safe, sanitary, appropriate? Large enough to accommodate sports activities, parking? What are the relative costs of construction likely to be?

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One would think that by ranking the criteria, and then evaluating proposed sites in terms of those criteria, the decision as to where to place the school would be fairly simple, straightforward, and logical. Only if the scores of two or more sites turned out to be identical, should opinions be allowed to enter the picture. Otherwise, opinions shouldn't count. Reason and logic should determine the decision.

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Given that construction of a new school is such a huge investment, the less politics has to do with it, and the more careful the decisions, the better off the students, the teachers, the parents, the administrators, the community, the economy and the entire CNMI will be.

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Despite the brouhaha over the initial bid response to construction of a new power plant, CUC seems to be doing a better job of trying to make logical decisions. Its Board has contracted consultants to determine whether the 80MW plant originally planned for is still a valid concept, rather than letting public - or legislative - opinions determine the outcome.

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Even there, though, there is a problem. The length of time involved in the whole procurement process and the actual construction is so long that by the time a plant is actually ready to go into operation, the parameters that decided its original size and output capability may have changed so much as to be no longer valid.

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How does one avoid such a problem? By deciding from the very outset to build modally, in stages, so that additional power may be added - or not - as required, without incurring costly change-orders, or the delay of having to do the process all over.

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Duty-Free Shoppers, the flagship of tourist retail emporia, or the Marianas Visitors Authority, or both, need(s) to do some serious re-thinking of just how to attract tourists to the CNMI.

Offering name-brand shopping may be all very well, but don't most tourists also want some gifts, mementos, souvenirs, to take back with them? And couldn't those, per se, effectively serve as advertisement for the CNMI? Obviously, yes, and yes, you say.

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Unfortunately, the gifts, mementos, and souvenirs available at Duty Free Shoppers do no such thing. They are the biggest collection of cheap, tasteless, meaningless junk I have ever seen. Key chains by the hundreds dangling objects that have little or nothing to do with the CNMI; hostess towels and pot holders whose only connection to the CNMI is the word Saipan printed on them; magnets picturing generic or imaginary fish or fax machines or toilets or ducks; reed baskets, plastic trays, spoon rests and picture frames made in the Philippines from materials not found in the CNMI; crushed coral totems, lighters, tacky mugs, washcloth - all mass-produced elsewhere, all in garish colors more typical of Disney Land than tropical islands, all devoid of anything remotely reflective of the CNMI. It's downright embarrassing.

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What the CNMI has to sell, what it seems to me the CNMI would want to be remembered for, and what people might therefore want to take home as souvenirs, are tokens of the CNMI's colorful tropical fish, the variety of its tropical flowers, the beauty of its flame trees, the vitality of its stick dancers, the lore of latte stones and legends, the versatility of its coconut trees and their products, the ubiquity of tangentangen. Not in their natural state, of course, but in image and pictures.

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There isn't any reason that the keychains or the picture frames or the tea towels or the oven mitts or the plastic trays couldn't sport accurate reproductions of the tropical fish that tourists see when snorkeling, or accurate replicas of the bougainvillea, plumeria, orchid, hibiscus, oleander and flame tree blossoms the tourists all see along the roadside.

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There isn't any reason that postcards, or mini-sized or large posters or framed pictures couldn't be offered featuring stick dance and other indigenous dance performances, or the endless variety of mawr-mawrs people wear, or the wide variety of traditional woven baskets and purses. Pictures of some or all of these could be used as playing card backs - as they once were - or as post cards. Laminated placemats could show, in addition to any of the above, 101 uses of various parts of the coconut tree. What about the 101 uses - including car radio antennas - of tangentangen? What about sterling silver, or enameled or composition earrings or pendants in the form of plumeria blossoms, or angel fish, or latte stones?

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Then of course there are the sunsets. And pictures of the war relics. And vistas of Managaha

or Tinian on the horizon, of racing hobie-cats, or windsurfers. People husking coconuts, casting a fishing net, leading a cow to pasture, holding a prize rooster, picking a breadfruit..... The list is endless, both of images, and of ways to package, use, sell, those images.

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It might cost a bit more to make sure the original molds are accurate, that the colors used are authentic; it might cost a little to obtain the rights to mass-produce pictures in various formats, but otherwise similar objects, similarly produced, could be offered just as easily as the junk that is now being sold as souvenirs to gullible tourists by DFS. Shopping, it is said, is a big inducement for travelers. In the CNMI, at the moment, the DFS offers no such inducement insofar as souvenirs are concerned. While JoeTen carries a lot of the same junk, it does also carry a wider range of more appropriate items that are not quite as junky.

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The rewards, the return on investment, for offering a higher level of product should be substantial. Souvenirs - whether taken home as personal mementos or as gifts to give to others - that depict not only the unique charm but also the real beauty of the CNMI are bound to arouse far more interest, to become a far stronger inducement for visiting the CNMI, to be far more effective an advertisement for the CNMI than the generic pap now available.

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It's gratifying to see so much attention being paid to the PCB problem in Tanapag by the media as well as government officials. The attention is long overdue.

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It was, therefore, most disheartening to see the announcement that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) does not intend to resume clean-up of the PCB contamination in the Tanapag cemetery until a year from now - December 2000. That seems a totally unacceptable delay, given the years of neglect Tanapag has already suffered.

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Has the CNMI been usurped by the Guam discovery of PCB's in Mongmong? One would hope not. But it's clear that everyone involved must keep up the publicity, and the pressure on the ACE, if Tanapag is to be successful in getting its cemetery and other contaminated areas cleaned up in a timely fashion.

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If you found this column of interest, won't you share it with a friend? Thanks!