

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

A large new utt in our village was undergoing final touches earlier this week - the addition of another layer of palm fronds on the roof - in preparation for the arrival of the five traditional canoes and their crew who left the island of Pikelot about ten days ago and are due to arrive at the utt in Tanapag either tonight or tomorrow. Hindsight tells me I should have taken pictures of the process - from poles stuck in the ground to the framing of the roof and then the addition of cross-supports, and finally, the fastening of the many coconut fronds.

It's been a major village undertaking to gather all the materials, to strip the poles, prepare the fronds, painstakingly undertake the construction - with everyone involved working well into the evenings, on into the weekends. Lately, the chants of the dancers have been heard, rehearsing in preparation for the arrival ceremony. The sense of anticipation of the arrival of the canoeists is almost palpable.

Though originally undertaken as a re-enactment of traditional Carolinian practices, this event has broken with tradition in several significant ways. Traditionally, islanders would train for years, learning the ways of the waves, the tides, the stars in the sky and the winds before being judged ready to embark on such a venture. For only a few of the crew on this trip, however, has knowledge and familiarity with canoe travel been a normal part of their lives. Moreover, crew members include not only several Chamorros, but also a haole, and a woman. And, I've been told, there's a two-way radio aboard.

According to a member of the Carolinian Affairs office, the woman is Pialug's daughter-in-law. The presence of the Chamorros reflects a growing interest in reviving their skills in use of the proa, she said.

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Even more drastic change will come to the Northern Islands, if business interests, led by the president of the Chamber of Commerce, have their way. The president of the Chamber told Rotary Club members this past week that the Northern Islands are untapped assets the CNMI could do much more with.

There is talk of everything from basalt mining, diamond mining, and oil transshipment, to so-called eco-tourism with health spas, cable cars, nature trails and rock climbing. A commercial land lease program has been proposed, according to an article in the <I>Variety</I>, that envisions the construction of 500 to as many as 1,000 cottages and villas.

There is talk as well of conducting a study of risk and hazards from the islands' volcanoes, to maximize safety for whatever industries are developed in the islands.

What does not appear to be under consideration or discussion, what is not being mentioned in this context, is the need to develop a land use plan. Before any other plans are laid someone

needs to determine where the watersheds are, where the prime agricultural lands are, the location of wetlands and critical habitat areas. Someone needs to evaluate and plan equitable access to the limited shoreline typical of the Northern Islands. Guidelines need to be established to protect residential areas - including tourist facilities - from mining activities and associated barracks, from the noise, dust and pollution associated with oil transshipment or power generation.

Saipan's development has been haphazard - garment factories, worker barracks, hotels, homes, laundromats, neighborhood stores and multi-store mini-malls have gone up wherever buyer and seller could work a deal. Views have been blocked, neighborhoods disrupted, habitats destroyed, watersheds endangered, good farmland lost, due to the random construction allowed all over the island.

If steps aren't taken now, before development fever takes hold, the same could happen to the Northern Islands. And turn those "untapped assets" into another hodgepodge of lost opportunity.

On the other hand, with some forethought, they could become the CNMI's jewel attractions, whether diamonds are ever found there or not.

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The Governor is recommending that instead of all government utility bills being paid under a single allocation in the executive budget, each agency be billed separately for its power and water use. The Governor, in a letter recently sent to the heads of both houses of the legislature, urged that a new system be established that would force agencies and departments to become aware of their levels of usage of power and water.

There are many inefficiencies in government offices - from water-hungry toilets to poorly-fitted doors and windows - that no one has fixed because there has been no motive for doing so. If agencies and departments become responsible for their own energy consumption, the expectation is they will become far more concerned with maximizing energy efficiency on their premises.

Even if fuel and gas prices do go down, as some speculate they will, conserving energy makes sense. Oil and water are not renewable resources - once they are used up, there is no more. Cutting down on their use saves not only money, but also saves resources. In the long run, energy conservation also cuts down on pollution and helps maintain a healthy environment.

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The Marianas Visitors Bureau is recommending that CNMI businesses give discounts to U.S. military personnel who visit the CNMI. It isn't that I'm anti-military, or anything like that, but I must admit that the recommendation troubles me. Members of the military already get discounts on almost everything on the market through their access to commissaries and whatever it is they call the PX's nowadays. Beer, cigarettes, clothing, appliances - you name it, they can get it at a discount. So is the MVB suggesting that local businesses should try compete with the commissaries and the PX's and undercut their discount prices? How does that benefit the CNMI?

Or is the MVB saying that all those high-priced, foreign-made and mostly tasteless tourist “souvenirs” - that the military might not be able to find at their commissaries and PX’s - should be discounted for members of the military? And if that is what they’re saying, doesn’t that constitute an admission that those “souvenirs” are overpriced to begin with?

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The new year 2000 MTC telephone books are now available - have been, in fact, for several weeks at least. But I’ve heard no announcement, read no notice, received no message. I only happened to notice a new phone book at the bank the other day.

Supposedly, the Boy Scouts will be (are?) delivering the books to commercial businesses. But they haven’t reached our place of business yet. And what about residential customers? How are they supposed to learn of the book’s availability?

You’d think MTC had something to hide. In actuality, this year’s phone book shows some improvement over last year’s. The pages don’t seem quite so crowded - though I can’t tell whether it’s a matter of darker ink, larger type face, or a difference in the spacing. There’s been some improvement in the alphabetization within the blue pages of the government listings - most of the agencies are listed by their names, rather than under “D” for “Department of.” There still are a few “Board of” listings, though, and one “CNMI” listing. But within each department, the listings still follow a somewhat arbitrary sequence (hierarchical, perhaps?) rather than an alphabetical one - particularly under the Executive Branch.

In the white pages, unfortunately, businesses beginning with “the” are still listed under “T,” and a number of law offices are still listed under “L” for “law office of” rather than under the name of the attorney. The same firms are also listed as “Law office(s) of” under the “Attorneys” heading in the yellow pages rather than by the attorney name. Guess that will keep the 411 lines busy.