On My Mind 5/18/01

The intransigence (translation: stubbornness, refusal to compromise) of House members of the conference committee set up to find a mutually acceptable version of House Bill 12-317, is more than a little disturbing. House Bill 12-317, as originally written, would have rescinded the law that limits foreign workers to a three-year stay in the CNMI. The Senate made amendments, proposing that the three-year stay be suspended while a task force re-examine the issue of terms of work for foreign workers. The difference led to establishment of a conference committee, to work out differences.

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Since then, Senate members have offered numerous alternate scenarios, but House members have absolutely refused to budge from their position that the law must be rescinded with no conditions. There can be little doubt that, while not a member of the conference committee, the House Speaker fully supports—and indeed, may be responsible for—the position being taken by House members. Such unwillingness to compromise reflects poorly on the Speaker. As House leader, the Speaker has a responsibility to work with not only members of his own house, but also members of the other house and the executive branch, for the good of the CNMI as a whole.

To refuse to do so is a disservice to the entire electorate.

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Will the Speaker, should he be elected governor, be as unwilling to compromise in that position? NOT a good sign......

What will \$700,000 buy? Sole source contracts for an environmental consultant firm, but whether it will buy much else is highly doubtful. The money - to come from interest generated by the Marianas Public Land Trust - would be used to search for contaminants other than PCBs in Tanapag village.

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But House Bill 12-378, which calls for appropriation of the funds, does not specify the contaminants for which testing should be done, nor does it specify which areas should be tested. Without more specific information, the sole source consultant is being asked, in effect, to test the air, the ground and the water, inch by inch, in the entire village of Tanapag and its environs, looking for so-far unspecified toxins. Given that no one test is able to identify all known toxins, that's a pretty unreasonable - and un-do-able task. Any firm that would accept that kind of a blanket contract, moreover, would leave its own qualifications in doubt.

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With the disturbing news that even the popular, locally-owned Pacific Gardenia is suffering financially, and will be not only closing its conference center, but also limiting its service to breakfast and luncheons, surely a better use in support of the local economy could be found for that \$700,000 than to give employment to a sole-sourced off-island consultant for a wild goose chase.

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It's fascinating to watch the way some people reason. The Marianas Visitor's Bureau Director was quoted, the other day, as saying that MVA is happy with its current management setup, and that "the last 25 years have proven that its chain of command is workable and effective." I don't think so. Otherwise, why would Rota and Tinian be lobbying so strenuously for deputy managers of their own?

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It is patently clear that the bulk of MVA emphasis and effort has consistently been aimed at Saipan. Though Rota and Tinian could eventually regret the opening of their islands to increased tourism traffic before adequate controls are in place (zoning, in particular), as members of the Commonwealth, they are entitled to an equal opportunity to tourist promotion for their islands.

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Moreover, increased tourism traffic to Rota and Tinian could very easily result in increased traffic to Saipan. Tinian and Rota have unique and distinctive attractions - Tinian not only the Tinian Dynasty but also the atom bomb pits, Rota its bird sanctuary, zoo and natural beauty - that might easily qualify them as primary destinations. But once there, what tourist would not want to visit Saipan as well?

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Today's <I>Variety</I> reports that as a result of a legislative conference committee session on appropriation of the aviation fuel tax, MVA will be required to create the position of deputy director for each of the two islands, thus addressing the two islands' very valid concerns. Let's hope the compromise survives the final vote by the House and Senate. Despite the Director's apparent blind spot, this system IS "broke," and therefore it does need fixing.

Judging from the decrease in tourist visits to the CNMI, efforts to promote tourism do not seem to be all that productive. Perhaps new insight could be gained by having members of MVA - and other interested parties - take a "self-test" and ask themselves what it is they look for when they are the tourist in other countries. Have them list what is important to them, what determines where they go, what they do, how long they stay, how much they spend and what they spend it on.

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Granted, the preferences of Japanese tourists - the CNMI's biggest target to date - have supposedly been thoroughly studied, and are therefore supposedly well known. But if this were the case, would CNMI's tourism traffic be suffering?

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An article on tourism and investment concerns in the CNMI, which appeared in the May-June issue of <I>American-Pacific Business Magazine</I>, mentions the expected tourism concerns, such as prostitution in Garapan, less-than-pristine waters in the lagoon, and the high crime rate. But the author, Tsuneo Shimoji, chairman of the 16,000-member Japan Economic Parliamentary Association, also lists some possible tourist attractions that judging from the evidence at hand, the MVA has not spend much effort on: an exchange program in socio-economic and cultural affairs, different form[s] of concert; exhibits of arts and culture [aimed at the tourist market]; and sport competitions - all of which would include Korea, China, Taiwan the Philippines and other

neighboring countries.

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Perhaps it's time to take a new slant on just what to offer tourists - instead of just more of the same?

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Another example of people's odd ways of thinking: the harping on the harmful effects of pesticides and poisonous chemicals by House member Tom Pangelinan in his stubborn efforts to place a public park in what is prime agricultural land and has long been designated an integral part of the Kagman Watershed project.

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If Pangelinan has hard evidence to back his concern about farmer use of pesticides in the area, he's not sharing it. Monitoring of water well quality is intense in the area since Kagman is a major groundwater source - with potential pollution not only from the golf course, but also from erosion in general. No source of pollution has been reported - unless DEQ and CUC are not properly inspecting the wells - or is this what Pangelinan is trying to say?

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The farmers themselves are required to develop and maintain conservation management plans that not only conserve water but protect the quality of the water in the entire watershed area. Either Pangelinan is using the potentially harmful effects of pesticides as a "red flag" - with no basis in truth - or he is withholding potentially critical information. In either case, his behavior just does not make much sense.............

Even though it isn't perfect - there's spill-over from the gutters, so not all the rain water stays in the catchment system - it sure is satisfying to know that, as the occasional heavy shower sweeps through the area, some of that rain water is going directly into my water storage tank. There is no need to wait until the rain filters through the aquifer, gathers in wells, is pumped up into the island's water system - and even then, is released only during water hours.

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It may not be safe to drink without boiling it first, but at least it isn't salty - and it is available, not only immediately, but all day long. It's a wonder more people don't have their own water catchment system.......