

On My Mind

1/25/02

One agency that seems to have it all together is the Coastal Resource Management Office. The agency has been conducting a series of free workshops this past week on the permits it issues - what standards it uses, what areas it has authority over, what procedures it follows, and how enforcement is carried out. The workshops - there is one more on Monday - are open to all who are interested - other government agencies, potential developers, consultants, the general public.

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The purpose of the workshops is not only to provide information on present practices - particularly to those who may become or already are involved in the permit application process - but also to solicit input on where present practices - as spelled out in agency regulations - could be improved. Held in air-conditioned comfort at the Hyatt, with free coffee, tea, juices and pastries - as well as pencils and note paper - the sessions have been smoothly run, well attended, and fruitful.

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Conducting the workshops is Becky Cruz Lizama, CRM Permit Manager. She is articulate, knowledgeable, personable. Handouts, which closely follow the presentations, are provided for each session. Discussion is encouraged throughout; as a result a number of problems have been identified, and numerous suggestions for change or modification of the present regulations offered.

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Review of regulations covering the port and industrial area revealed, for instance, that there is no provision for developments catering to cruise ship traffic - a serious omission if indeed the CNMI intends to pursue an increase in cruise ship-based tourism. The present provision for settling deadlocks in the permitting process (referring the decision to the governor) was felt to be too political, and the recommendation made that a more objective mechanism be found.

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A question was raised as to the CRMO's historic "bias" towards granting permits: shouldn't the CRMO be more objective in its approach to permit applications? Because the practice of leasing public land to developers prior to their having gone through CRMO's permitting process establishes a level of expectation in the developer, and puts CRMO under pressure to accommodate the developer and issue a permit that it might not otherwise grant, the recommendation was made that developers apply for a CRMO permit prior to obtaining public land leases.

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Providing a draft of proposed permit conditions to developers was suggested, to give developers an opportunity to modify their proposals. Public access to the shoreline - and cliff line - raised numerous questions but few new ideas. How to moderate the effect of jet-skis as well as the rest of motorized vessel operation in the lagoon came under extended discussion; one suggestion: rotate the areas where skis are allowed, to allow re-growth of sea grass.

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CRMO has set a highly commendable example. Opening an agency's practices and procedures to public review, comment and input - and doing so in a smooth, organized, non-confrontational manner - is a practice rarely seen here, or elsewhere for that matter. Now if only other of the

CNMI's agencies would be so brave.....

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Of course, as the saying goes, the proof is in the pudding - it remains to be seen whether the recommended changes will be acted upon. But if the conduct of the sessions is any indicator, the odds are that they will be.

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The Coastal Resource Management Office receives its funding from the federal government. Its function is to protect and preserve coastal resources. It exercises its authority through the granting of permits for development and other activities within defined "Areas of Particular Concern," such as the lagoon and reef area, the port and industrial area, and wetland areas.

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On small islands such as the CNMI, a coastal resource management office's influence can be enormous, since so much of the islands come under its jurisdiction. And in the CNMI, which has no zoning code, the responsibility for maintaining a healthy coastal environment has been a much heavier burden than falls to most CRM agencies.

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While its operation, policies, and granting of permits have been highly political throughout most of its existence, under the present acting administrator the agency has undergone a decided shift toward more objective and equitable practices and procedures. Acting Administrator Joaquin D. Salas also seems to have worked wonders internally, creating a staff that, while small, is effective dedicated, capable, hard-working, responsive.

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I was heartened to see that someone is finally lodging protest against the treatment being given the captives the U.S. is bringing to its base in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Though hints have come through that the captives are far from docile, they are human beings, and they deserve to be treated with the same consideration, dignity and respect due all human beings. Reports to date tell us that the captives are under bright lights 24 hours a day, that they are housed in small open "cages," that they've been blind-folded, sedated, shackled, etc., etc.

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Most demeaning of all, perhaps, is the report that their beards and hair are being shaved - allegedly as a health measure. Surely there are less intrusive, less demoralizing, less humiliating ways of getting rid of the lice supposedly in their hair and beards?

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According to the *PDN* a coalition of clergy, journalism professors and civil rights attorneys has now filed suit in federal court in Los Angeles demanding that the captives be brought before a court and formal charges filed. Other moves are afoot as well, including a request by Amnesty International and the Red Cross that the captives be given prisoner-of-war status under the Geneva Convention.

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It has been said from the beginning that the basis of the conflict with the Taliban and the Al Qaeda lies in the differences in economic status, outlook, lifestyle between the terrorists and the

Western world, and that war - in the ordinary sense of death and destruction - cannot resolve that conflict. Rather, pundits say, the West will have to help the Taliban, the Al Queda, overcome their long-standing impoverishment and its consequent build-up of resentment if there is to be a lessening of terrorism.

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Treating the prisoners of war that Bush claims are not (POWTAN?) - since there is no war - so brutishly does nothing to begin the process of healing the resentment. In fact, it only aggravates it. It serves only to intensify their hatred, their messianic terrorism, their willingness to become martyrs to the cause.

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The battle of semantics surrounding the POWTAN (prisoners of war that aren't) is pretty funny. One reason given for denying them that status is that they don't have uniforms, or insignia designating their affiliation with any formal group. Looks like whoever dreamed up that interpretation needs to update his vocabulary as well as his grasp of today's reality.

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The situation isn't much better with the boat people seeking asylum who have been imprisoned in Australia's outback. Except there women and children are also being mistreated - not only men.

They have gone to great lengths to protest their treatment - from setting fire to their shelters to hunger strikes to sewing their lips together. Yet Australian authorities have refused to make any changes in the conditions at the retention camps.

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It is difficult to understand why their plight has not raised the same degree of international concern that has the plight of the captives at Guantanamo. If hostile fighters deserve decent accommodations, why don't men, women and children whose only crime is seeking asylum?