

On My Mind

7/12/02

As the reports continue to come through of Guam's struggle to recuperate from typhoon Chata'an, one has to wonder whether the CNMI would have been equally devastated had the typhoon hit us as hard. For one, the CNMI does not have concrete power poles, which may actually be an advantage rather than a disadvantage, since one theory goes that wooden poles are able to flex with the wind, while concrete ones cannot, and therefore snap off.

In addition, the CNMI's Commonwealth Utility Commission crews do a pretty good job of trimming trees to keep power lines clear, particularly as storms approach, which has noticeably cut down on the number and length of power outages during high winds.

But what about the generators for the water wells? What about the power plants themselves? What about the storm-proof-ness of residences? If the damage on Rota is any indicator, there is still much of the CNMI that, like Guam, is not any better prepared to face a typhoon this time than the last time one hit.

Which raises the question: whose responsibility is it to identify the problem areas, come up with solutions, and take the steps necessary to make sure that all sectors of the CNMI are better prepared to survive the next typhoon that comes along?

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Speaking of responsibility, a similar question could be asked in relation to the dive "accident" in the Grotto two weeks ago, where a Korean diver lost his life under dubious circumstances. Not only were the waters already rough from approaching typhoon Chata'an - a strong indication that diving in the Grotto was not safe to begin with - but, according to the reports in the papers, the divers had come back into the Grotto "for more air," apparently planning to make two dives in quick succession without the required surface interval. Finding one of the divers missing, five guides went back out to look for him; two of the guides ran into trouble themselves, and had to resort to clinging to a buoy until rescued.

The CNMI has passed laws requiring that dive shops obtain business licences, and carry adequate insurance to cover dive accidents. The laws stipulate that dive instructors must be certified by national dive associations like the Professional Association of Diving Instructors and the National Association of Underwater Instructors. The question is: who is enforcing the law? Who is making sure that the dive shops on island all do indeed have current business licenses, and do in fact carry the appropriate insurance? What government agency is checking up to make sure that all the dive guides and instructors are properly certified? That air tanks are properly filled? That the rental dive equipment is in working order?

Are there any procedures for fining dive shops that take unnecessary risks by allowing dives in poor weather? By taking novice divers to sites known to be difficult, tricky? Should there be?

Diving is, if you will, a tourism industry. But it will draw tourists only so long as it is perceived to be safe, and operated within the law. It should be monitored as closely as any other industry related to tourism. Though deaths of scuba divers are not rampant, closer monitoring would nonetheless seem called for. But whose responsibility that is is not clear.

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For a legislature that isn't sure there's enough money to support the administration's budget, it sure is spending what money there is in seemingly irresponsible ways. The Legislature has approved, for example, the building of a social hall for Tanapag - the invitation to bid appeared this week - despite the fact that a completed new social hall for Tanapag was dedicated just three months ago. That social hall was built with FEMA money. The new new one is, apparently, being built with money appropriated by the legislature. Still standing - and being used - is the original social hall on the beach.....

Another odd expenditure of money - some \$450,000 - is the plan to build a two-room school on Anatahan - as evidenced by the issuance of a request for bid this week - before a delegation to the island to evaluate the siting for the building has even left Saipan. And, in fact, the Public School System's Board of Education Vice Chairman has acknowledged - again, before the site visit has even occurred - that it likely would cost even more than budgeted, because of the difficult terrain, the logistics, and transportation problems.

Though both presumably fall into the category of Capitol Improvement Projects, which have certain limitations on how CIP funds may be spent, neither seems a prudent expenditure. The first is duplicative, and the second not only exorbitantly expensive, but bound to be a continuous drain on the budget with the on-going requirement for transport of staff, fuel, foodstuffs, equipment and materials. Surely in times of economic constraints, it would make more sense to find CIP projects that have a potential for generating revenue - as would construction of a visitor center, for example - rather than a potential for generating more expenditures.

Perhaps its time the CIP program for the CNMI was re-examined, tighter control established, and more attention paid to priority needs?

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Almost as irresponsible is the belated interjection of the governor's special advisor for customs and quarantine into the discussion of what to do with the treated soil that is accumulating at the PCB treatment site near the Tanapag cemetery. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its contractor, ECC, have already brought in fresh soil to replace the contaminated soil that was excavated from numerous sites in Tanapag, leaving no place to put the treated soil.

After much discussion and negotiation it was finally agreed that the treated soil would be used as cover for the Puerto Rico dump, saving the Department of Public Works from having to purchase cover soil on the open market - a simple, practical, money-saving solution to the disposal problem.

Now comes the governor's special advisor for customs and quarantine and proposes that the treated soil be mixed with CUC sewer sludge and used as fertilizer. It is not the least bit clear why disposal of the soil should be a concern for customs and quarantine, to begin with. Nor is it the least bit clear why another proposal for using the soil is needed. All - and more - will be used up in covering the dump.

What is clear is that the idea, while it may have merit, is just a little too late, and may well be far too costly, since considerable research, evaluation and testing will have to be done to determine in what proportions the two components should be mixed for maximum effectiveness, and what procedures would be required to make the mixture safe to use as fertilizer. Moreover, in the meantime, the treated soil would just sit there, making the lot on which it is stored unavailable for other uses, and forcing DPW to go out and buy its cover soil from the private sector.

Complicating matters isn't the least bit helpful!

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We thought House Speaker Heinz Hofschneider's "package deal" a good one - that if the legislature passed three revenue-generating bills, he would support the administration's higher budget figure. It seemed only prudent, responsible, wise, to try make sure the revenue was there before approving seemingly unrealistically high expenditures levels in the proposed FY 2003 budget..

Unfortunately, that package seems to have eroded, thanks to apparent extensive lobbying on the part of the garment industry, which is claiming that one of those revenue-generating bills, the proposed increase in user fees, would trigger vast unemployment and economic decline. But as everyone knows, statistics can say anything one wants them too. The problem here is that neither the legislature nor the administration seem to have been willing or able to come up with persuasive counter-arguments.

Nor does the "solution" offered as compensation for dropping the "beautification tax," another of the proposed revenue-generating bills, seem very logical either. Rather than pass the tax, legislators are saying the money for the beautification can be deducted from funds already identified in the budget. But no one is saying what will happen to whatever it was those funds were intended for to begin with.

Some say that Hofschneider is refusing to support the administration budget request for reasons unrelated to any imbalance - real or perceived - between revenue and expenditures. But his argument that the administration's budget is not realistic is pretty persuasive. The question is whether there are enough legislators with the integrity to back Hofschneider's insistence on a more reasonably balanced budget.