

On My Mind
1/16/04

Weren't the promises of working together, of harmony, of "sweetness and light" that everyone mouthed at this past week's inauguration of the 14th Legislature inspiring? House and Senate leadership each promising regular meetings and coordination, the Governor agreeing to weekly meetings, everyone assuring cooperation and smiling and shaking hands?

But just like the New Year's resolutions made only weeks earlier - most of which we all know are broken sooner rather than later - it doesn't require a lot of cynicism to believe that few if any of those promises will hold up for very long. Some simply aren't realistic. A promise of bi-weekly, or monthly meetings might be, but weekly? The governor isn't on island that consistently; the legislature isn't in session that regularly! And already there is disagreement between House and Senate leadership regarding the staffing of the Legislative Bureau.

Nor should comfort be taken in the surprising abdication by former Senate President Paul A. Manglona of his seat to Tinian's Joaquin G. Adriano. It was not accompanied by trumpets, fanfare, or even a modest and moving speech of abnegation and humility. Nice gesture though it may have appeared, it was accomplished behind closed doors, and presented as a done deal, typical of his political shenanigans.

So long as both leaders are promising sweetness and light - though it's probably too heretical to appoint such committee chairmen as were re-elected to "minority chair" of their respective committees - they might try to find some way of utilizing the experience and background knowledge of what are now minority member in the new structure of House and Senate committees. That would facilitate continuity, and the sharing of accumulated data, at the very least..

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On the subject of re-cycling (the expertise of minority legislators), I've only recently discovered that the transfer station at Puerto Rico also serves as a re-cycling center. Plastic bottles, glass bottles of all colors, corrugated cardboard, and newspapers and white paper are all accepted, in addition to aluminum cans and yard waste. There are some kinks yet in the system - the last time I brought in my modest assortment of re-cyclables, I ended up in the wrong place, and all was thrown into one pile, which I later learned would be taken to the dump - just what I had made the effort to not have happen!

But Steve Hiney, head of the Solid Waste program at the Department of Public Works, told me that already 20% of the trash that usually goes to the dump is being diverted through re-cycling for use elsewhere both on and off-island. The glass is crushed and used on island and the yard waste is put through a shredder and used as mulch. So far, the rest is still sent off-island.

Hiney acknowledged that more work is needed to make the re-cycling program more effective - perhaps offering other drop-off sites, or offering re-cycle containers for use in the home, but said that work on more publicity for the program is already under way.

A resolve to re-cycle - both in order to slow the growth of the new land-fill, and to conserve resources by re-using them - is less taxing than most, as well as more broadly beneficial. Just make sure the goods get dumped in the right place!

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Something that needs reviving if not re-cycling is the law library housed in the Guma Husticio. What a deserted, useless wasteland that is! Poor Larry Hilbloom, for whom the library is named! There isn't a chair or a writing surface in among the shelves - just some furniture in a lounge area off and remote from the books themselves. So there's no place, no way, to sit and read, to spread out paper and books and take notes, to conveniently compare texts or follow references. Whatever happened to all the tables and chairs that were in the library in its former location?

There's no attendant in sight either - to provide assistance to those who might not know their way around, who may not be familiar with the use of legal references.

Instead, the space designed for library staff has been turned over to the Law Revision Commission, whose staff are frequently interrupted and called upon to do the job of the library staff, but have neither the time, training nor authority to do so.

The law books themselves, as well as the huge amount of space given to house them, represent an enormous amount of money. Keeping the books current - which presumably is being done - - is also an expensive investment. Yet all of that is being wasted because it is so inhospitable, and there is no one there to service the collection anyway.

Techies may say that much of the library's content can now be accessed through CD subscriptions to legal publishers or direct on-line access, but there are those who cannot afford either, and besides, there are times when seeing only one page at a time without being able to jump from one part of a book to another just isn't sufficient, helpful, user-friendly.

Moreover, the law library, supported as it is by government funds, shouldn't be restricted only to attorneys and their minions. It should be accessible to members of the public as well, but without staff on hand to interpret the collection, the books just sit there - a silent - and intimidating- reproach to all who dare to venture in.

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Maybe the cumulative experience of visiting the Marshalls, the CNMI, Guam and the FSM will give the visiting Secretary of the Interior and the Congressional delegation a fleeting impression of Micronesia in general, but what real understanding of any of them can such "whirlwind" visits - in the CNMI's case, a mere 30-some hour stay - leave them with?

Though the itinerary has been kept secret, no doubt they'll be taken to see the new landfill and a

cleaned-up garment factory, and a preview of the 60th anniversary celebration of the invasion of the CNMI, but they'll spend at least as much time at the Hyatt, in meal functions and at meetings.

The Secretary of the Interior will appear at the Chamber of Commerce installation of officers this evening, but it will largely be a one-way dialogue - from her to them, not vice versa.

I sure am glad it's not my tax-payer money that is paying for this jaunt!

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Short takes:

-I would pick a nit with one of Harry Blalock's recent commentaries in which he deplors the lack of a work ethic that would keep people on the job despite rosaries, and other family obligations. Rosaries, novenas and similar family obligations are part of the culture. If the local labor market - or the government - provided for part-time work and shared jobs, the culture could be maintained and at the same time, more people would take, and be able to keep, jobs. Is anyone listening out there?

-Another querulous comment: why weren't the six stick dancers who participated in the Rose Bowl parade identified? Surely they deserve some recognition too?

- Why didn't the CNMI press give Juan Pan Guerrero's selection as person of the year more prominence? Is it not an honor that another entity considers a local resident so noteworthy?

- Why did Public Works install yet another artificial, miserable - and difficult - S-curve access road where Coastal (or is it Lagoon?) Road below Coffee Care meets the road coming down from Capitol Hill? Why weren't the established road patterns followed?

- Why don't the Guam and CNMI Humanities Councils cooperate enough so that if one brings in a renowned person from state-side, the other can also take advantage of the celebrity's proximity?

Guam just brought in a known children's author. But he's not coming to the CNMI. What a shame!