

On My Mind
2/13/04

It would appear that CNMI teachers are at risk of being “ripped off” in an offering not unlike that offered to students of erstwhile Saipan University. For a mere \$650, and a mere five days of study, aspiring teachers are being offered a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) certificate from an institution calling itself “Canadian Institute of English” (CIE). The offering has been reported in the paper, through flyers, and via an MCV interview.

The offering appears suspect in a number of ways. While apparently neither a national nor an international board exists which accredits TESL, TEFL (Teaching English as a Second/ Foreign Language), or TESOL programs, any number of well known and established educational institutions in the U.S. offer certificates in this area. The CIE, on the other hand, states that it is accredited by a St. Petersburg University - located in far-away Russia.

The price is also suspect. An on-line offering by ICAL (which the site states was formerly an acronym but is now to be considered a name per se) at “teacher-training.net/accreditation.html” offers an on-line course leading to TESL/TEFL certification for \$265, and a TESL/TEFL course with teaching practice leading to certification for \$395 - considerably less than the \$650 required for the one-week CIE course.

The five-day duration of the course also raises questions. ICAL courses are offered on a “do-it-when-you can” basis; its site states that the fastest anyone has completed its on-line course is in 22 days, while most students require three to four months. Another major institutional source, The International TESOL Program, requires a full semester before certification is granted. And other institutions go so far as to offer Master’s degrees in TESL.

Furthermore, neither Northern Marianas College nor the Public School System is supporting or endorsing this offering.

Applicants might want to inquire of institutions where they hope to use the TESOL certification in obtaining positions whether the CIE certificate is acceptable there.

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With concerns growing over available land in the CNMI - for homesteads, for agriculture, for conservation - one area where “savings” might be effected is in the design of future homesteads. Since TT times, the Marianas Public Land Authority has used a pattern called “planned urban development” or PUD, in designing homestead areas. PUDs, however, are based on what might be described as a car-based community, where everyone travels everywhere - be it to go shopping, visit friends, go to church or go to school - by car, where community closeness is not taken into account, and where land availability is not a concern.

PUDs, as implemented by MPLA, have streets so wide that they not only become a barrier to meeting and becoming friends with neighbors but also add to stormwater run-off problems, make

no allowance for churches or schools or local mom-and-pop stores within walking distance, and locate each house squarely in the middle of each lot, which, together with wide individual drive-ways, chews up usable yard space and prevents proper leachfield construction. Too often, construction of these PUDs by MPLA has also taken down any trees in the area, leaving the sites hot and barren. In addition, the ban against raising chickens, or perhaps a pig, deprives home-steaders of any possibility for subsistence activity.

The inefficient use of land also adds to the cost of such things as road construction and maintenance, as well as the costs of efficient service delivery, be it power, water, sewer, police, fire, or even mail.

Particularly in light of the increasing shortage of available public land, isn't it high time the MPLA revised its approach to land use, and adopted more economic, efficient and locally relevant homestead layout patterns?

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It's also high time someone drew in the reins of the Commonwealth Ports Authority. Having already taxed the community with parking fees at the airport as well as at the Tinian ferry site, CPA has now announced that it also wants to charge passengers a departure tax at the airport. The tax, which must first be approved by the Federal Aviation Authority (let us hope it does not do so) is intended to "mitigate the possibility of another year of shortfall...and to finance the 1.25 bond ratio...."

In its seemingly never-ending search for more income, the CPA has also quintupled the monthly fee it charges off-airport car rental businesses to pick up and deliver passengers to the airport. Previously, this fee was \$1,000; it has been raised to \$5,000 in response to concerns raised by on-airport car rental businesses who, CPA says, pay as much as \$8,000 per month in rent. Off-airport car rental businesses must also use non-marked cars, and are only allowed, under CPA regs, to pick up and drop off pre-arranged passengers.

CPA is apparently now also disavowing any responsibility for maintaining Sugar Dock. After making liability disclaimers by posting a sign at the dock, CPA has now said that any maintenance work on the dock should be done by the Historical Preservation Office instead. And it is still pressing for approval of its proposal to join the poker parlor industry by setting up poker machines at its airports.

Yet, according to a report in the 2/8/04 issue of the <I>Tribune</I>, CPA is showing a steady increase in airplane arrivals and departures, leading to a 9% increase in revenues for the first quarter of 2004. Moreover, from all reports (or lack thereof) this increase in revenue stems not from any cuts in staff, or curtailment of benefits to employees or attempts at greater efficiency of operations, but solely from increased business.

Shouldn't the CPA be required to "tighten its own belt" before it increases even more the costs - to tourists and residents alike - of using its facilities?

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Short takes:

- Forgotten in the story last week on comparisons between CNMI and stateside net salaries was mention of state sales taxes - which almost every state collects - and other state and local taxes such as school and property taxes. These, too, take a considerable bite out of stateside salaries and, since they are not imposed here, should be included in the calculation of "savings" in local salaries.

- Could it be that the elusive Dr. Jesus Camacho - whose lengthy diatribes, mostly aimed at NMC and its president, have taken up so much space in our papers - was an unsuccessful candidate for the position of NMC president?

- Even though the construction industry appears to be on an upswing, according to a report on the front page of the 2/5 issue of the <I>Variety</I>, the complaint is made that its level - at \$15.5 million in 2003 - pales in comparison with levels ranging from \$90.4 - \$20 million, achieved between 1996 and 2000. The question, though, is what constitutes a "normal" level of construction in a stable economy. What proportion of the total economy should the construction industry provide? Without context such figures are relatively meaningless, and any conclusions drawn therefrom suspect.

- Congratulations to Public Auditor Mike Sablan for trying to impose sanity on the governor's poorly conceived plan for trying to improve the government's procurement practices. The governor had created a committee of 21 assorted government officials; Sablan said he did not think it efficient or effective to try work with so large and cumbersome a group.

- As local newspapers were quick to report, the CNMI House leadership did offer committee memberships to minority members, contrary to what this column had stated last week. My apologies for the error.