

On My Mind
11/19/04

If a group of people act suspiciously, act unreasonably, act without even trying to explain why they are acting as they are, surely an observer of such actions is justified in suspecting that something's amiss, that hidden, secret, and very seductive temptations are in play here to make the group act so irrationally. What other explanation can there be for the persistence with which the Board of Directors of the Marianas Public Land Authority continues to insist on negotiating with Azmar for rights to mine pozzolan ash on Pagan?

The "right" way, if one may use that word, the logical way, to start the process of mining Pagan's ash, would be to verify - through the use of reliable, certified experts - whether the ash really is the pozzolan type, and if so, to determine, as best as possible, how much pozzolan there is on Pagan. The next step would be to openly solicit requests for proposals from companies interested in mining the pozzolan, so that one could compare the bids and the terms offered by the various responders.

Another way to go about it, after the determination of the extent of the ash was completed, would be to draw up terms of reference (or whatever the term of art is) and send out invitations to bid on the project as defined by the CNMI.

Granted both such approaches would necessitate some funding up-front - to cover the cost of the assessment of Pagan's ash, to prepare the request for proposal or invitation to bid, and that the CNMI has - depending on which pocket one looks into, whom one talks to - a shortage of funds. There is little doubt, however, that funds could be found for such expenditures, since the expected return gives every indication of being highly rewarding.

It all sounds so simple, so obvious, so straightforward.

Yet MPLA's Board of Directors has not done any part of this. Instead, it has responded to an ever-changing series of unsolicited proposals submitted by a "made-up-on-the-spot" company that has no history, no record of mining experience, and no visible assets, which are being unremittingly huckstered by a once highly-esteemed teacher and author of an excellent CNMI history textbook. Despite well-publicized protests from a concerned public, from former Pagan residents, from members of the legislature - including its Speaker - the MPLA Board has shut its eyes and ears to reason and, as though under a spell, continues to put off and to extend, again and again, deadlines in its negotiations with Azmar.

And now, it is insisting that its negotiations be done behind closed doors, in secret. Which detracts even more from any claim to openness, fairness, impartiality and objectivity that MPLA might ever have hoped to lay claim to.

If one were to assume that what is motivating the MPLA Board members to act as they are is monetary, then one would have to assume, as well, that Azmar believes the payback for mining the ash will be pretty high, given that "motivating" MPLA is only the beginning of the permit

process. It will eventually be necessary to “motivate” sufficient numbers of CRM and DEQ and the five CRM Board agencies as well for Azmar’s flimsy credentials and ill-defined project plans to be accepted and approved. And if there is that much money to be made, the pittance Azmar is offering the CNMI is even more unacceptable than it now is.

Is there a better explanation for the MPLA Board members’ behavior? I’m listening.....

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It wasn’t well advertised, and it’s not very accessible, but I would encourage all and sundry to pay a visit to the Commonwealth Art Council’s annual Christmas show at the gallery on Capitol Hill.

It is open Monday-Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. - the grand opening was last Friday.

Mostly it is wall art of one sort or another, but there is a broad variety - from Ben Sawyer’s abstract ink sketches, Larry Lee’s impressive photographs of local scenery and Jeanne Rayphand’s interesting range of acrylic subjects and montages, to John Davis’ diverse acrylic, charcoal, pencil and ink block contributions, Jung Ae Lee’s lovely flower paintings and just two lava-lavas - all for sale in time for Christmas gifts. Various shell and bead jewelry items are also available - all made by local artists.

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As everyone knows, neighbors can set both good examples and bad. I’d like to cite one of each this week. First the bad: Guam’s ongoing battle between its governor and its first elected attorney general certainly doesn’t say much for the idea of an elected AG. What guarantee would the CNMI have, if it decided to elect its attorney general - and apparently, there is talk to that effect - that similar stand-offs would not occur here? Is there some stipulation or other one could insert in such a law, were it to pass, that would avoid such shenanigans? If there’s not, I can’t think why the CNMI would want to expose itself to such risks.

The good: Palau, in its recent gubernatorial election, also submitted five constitutional amendments to the voters. Four of the amendments passed, including one that will limit the terms of its congressional representatives and another that grants Palau’s citizens dual citizenship. The Palauans were able to made substantive changes to their constitution without the expense of electing delegates to a convention, without the expense of conducting a convention, without the expense of conducting separate balloting for votes on whatever proposals might have come out of a convention.

The CNMI might want to bear this in mind as it considers holding a constitutional convention. Palau has shown - if proof were needed - that it is possible to make several amendments to the constitution even without a convention. And in these days of economic shortfalls, the cost-savings should not be treated lightly.

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The motto used by Tommy Remengesau, the Republic of Palau's newly re-elected leader, is also worth emulating, worth adopting: "Preserve the best, improve the rest." I'm not sure whether the motto is uniquely Remengesau's, or whether it is Palau's in general, but that's almost immaterial.

It is one that could have worked wonders if it had been applied in the CNMI over the years. Even now, though, it's still worth working towards.....

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"Improving the rest" is just what the Beach Road Area Management Project, or BeachRAMP, community is doing along Beach Road near where Quartermaster Road intersects. The brain-child of Ivan Groom - who wrote the grant for the project - BeachRAMP does two things: it demonstrates a variety of strategies for controlling erosion and, as it is completed, it will also considerably reduce the non-point source pollution that muddies the lagoon along the road after every heavy rain.

On exhibit are several types of grass pavers - brick, geoblock and geoweb - that hold gravel, sand, etc., in place and allow grass to grow over the "retainers," thus preventing the soil from just washing away, as well as several types of permeable soil, enhanced by geotextiles, crushed glass, porous concrete and used tires, which allow run-off from the road to sink through the soil rather than gush over it into the lagoon. This water-retention ability also allows nutrients in storm water run-off to be filtered out first, so that it doesn't promote the growth of algae once it hits the lagoon.

Groom said various parking spots that will be provided as a result of the project will be rotated by the use of moveable bollards, just as farmers rotate cattle in the field, to allow the grass to re-grow in spots where parking has been allowed.

Other "improvements" included in the BeachRAMP are the planting of a variety of grasses, seeds and trees chosen for their ability to halt erosion, a number of "swales" - grass-covered ditches, if you will - along the inland side of Beach Road and along Quartermaster Road that will slow down the storm water run-off, and numerous signs along the path to explain what is being demonstrated. Accommodations are also being made to provide for wheelchair access to the path and facilities.

Still to come are the construction of a solar-powered restroom facility, and an amphitheater and small stage for use as an Environmental Quality Outdoor Education Center. Help for the project has come from the CNMI Energy Office, the Marianas Resources Conservation and Developmental Council, the Development Disabilities Council, Friends of the Saipan Beach Pathway, and contractor Manny Tenorio. A ground breaking for the restroom was held at the site of the demonstrations this past Wednesday evening.

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May we all find, on Thanksgiving Day next week, more to be thankful, rather than regretful, for.

war against terrorists being won; war against terrorism isn't. Trib 9/24 p 31

re tinting? Find bill

Do a piece on staffing of the telecommunications commission and funding for it. Who paid Alan B, Jay L, Sean Frink? Etc.....They want more money, but look what they accomplished with as little as they had. What would the money be used for?????/