

On My Mind

6/17/05

Let's see. The Retirement Fund is increasing the contribution government is required to put into the Fund because otherwise it cannot meet its costs. The Commonwealth Utilities Commission has increased its power rates for the same reason. On the other hand, the House and Senate have voted to eliminate the CUC increase because it causes a hardship for consumers. The Marianas Public Land Authority is waiving all fees required of news and film makers (a revenue source) during the visit of the Japanese Imperial Couple. The Legislature is giving more money to the Commonwealth Ports Authority to try entice airlines to land here, and may give more money to the Marianas Visitors Bureau to try entice more tourists to visit, taking money from who knows where. And a legislator wants to rescind the end of the extravagant 30% retirement bonus - which would have saved the CNMI considerable money.</P>

Money flowing in all directions - being given and taken away, left and right - as though there were plenty of it all around, as though everyone had money to spare, as though there were no limit to it - and as though individuals and agencies alike could afford the cuts to their budgets, the increases in costs.</P>

Is anyone in charge? Is anyone looking at the over-all flow of dollars? Has anyone set any priorities? If so, is anyone following them? Is anyone trying to make sense of where - if anyplace - there is fat to be squeezed, of where there's none - where the deficit is critical? Is anyone applying reason and logic to any part of the overall picture?</P>

And the bigger question: Is anyone attempting to reduce costs? To decrease outflow? To save a dollar here and there? There's been no executive order to raise the setting on government thermostats, for example. No executive order to cap salaries, to put a moratorium on hiring. No legislative resolve to curb travel, or reduce staffing, or stop holding sessions on Rota and Tinian (no other state or national legislature I know of - not even other multi-island ones - spends money on such things). What kind of dream-world, fantasy-land are they living in, anyway?</P>

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The Retirement Fund apparently does need additional income - the government has not been paying its share of retirement contributions - but to increase the size of that contribution - with so little forewarning, without a hearing, or at least discussion? How do Retirement Fund officials think the other government agencies are going to be able to afford to do that?</P>

CUC did hold hearings, did give forewarning of the need to raise its rates. Yet the legislature has voted to rescind rate increases, rather than offering alternative ideas or sources of funding. Let us hope the governor vetoes the bill. With CUC facing large increases in fuel oil costs, how does the legislature expect CUC to pay for them?</P>

The governor did urge agencies to shut off their aircon for two hours a day. But which hours? Are the aircons on all night? Why not just raise the temperature and turn off the aircons all night long?</P>

It probably was a good idea for MPLA to waive permit requirement for press and media here to cover the visit of the Japanese Imperial Couple. The red-tape and paperwork would probably be overwhelming - and costly. But to waive the fees is another matter. Here is a simple, legitimate, expected, valid means of bringing in additional revenue to help our economy - rather a sizeable amount, quite probably. Why did the CNMI decide to just give away that opportunity?

Now there's a request to waive the room tax for federal officials who will be on island for the Imperial visit. Those taxes have been in force for years. Such taxes are standard. Why should the CNMI, already cash-strapped, waive additional sources of revenue? Most feds get a very adequate per diem. There is absolutely no need to grant them more favors. Let's hope the CNMI shows some backbone, and doesn't just give away those funds as well.

And if JAL is really in the poor position some press reports say it is, what kind of dreamy-eyed optimist ever imagined that the CNMI could - or would even want to - have JAL change its mind and continue flying into the CNMI on a regular basis? Has there been any consideration of the cost-benefit ratio of providing thousands more in incentives to airlines, travel agencies, as opposed to adding attractions in the CNMI, improving its image?

The sight of government officials falling all over themselves in their frenzy to solve their financial woes, to improve the economy, without a single thread of logic in evidence, would be funny if it weren't so tragic - and so frightening. The Saipan Chamber, in its recent economic summit conference, developed numerous practical, feasible, reasonable, short and long-term strategies for turning around the CNMI's present economic slump. Yet there's been no effort on the part of anyone in government to look at, to consider, to adopt much less adapt, a single one of them.

The solutions are there. Too bad no one is interested in their implementation.

Another example of the government going awry is the plan underway to widen airport road (from the light in Dandan to the airport) by adding a third, turning, lane. As markings indicate, this will mean taking down a number of the signature flame trees that now line that road, and that, at this moment, are so gloriously in bloom.

The road may need work - though even that is somewhat questionable, now that the problem near the Torres Refrigeration site has been resolved. After all, it was never meant to be a super-highway for 60 mile-per-hour traffic, but a scenic highway so that the military bunkers, the flame trees, the open spaces, could be seen, appreciated and enjoyed.

Nor is the road so congested that a third lane is required. (I was told that the original intention was to make it a FOUR-lane road, but that the cost of fixing the drainage problem was so high sufficient funds were no longer available - to which I can only say, thank god for small favors....)

In all the times I've been along that road, I've never yet seen it so congested that even one, much less two, additional lane(s) were called for.

I've also been told that the third lane is being added "for future needs." Judging from past experience, it will be a long time before Saipan's airport is so busy that that road will be congested enough to require the addition of even a turning lane.</P>

Aren't there better uses for that money? If it destroys an important part of what makes Saipan lovely, attractive to tourists, is it even worth spending those federal funds???? It is outright folly to apply for, make use of, federal grants that do not meet the needs, suit the interests, of the CNMI just because they are there. Public Works should shelve that project and let us keep our flame trees, that very dramatic arrival and departure roadway!</P>

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Short takes:

- Idle question: what is it that prompts the watermelon vendors to all collect along one part of Garapan's Beach Road? Isn't that sort of silly? Why don't some of them park in Susupe? Or Chalan Kanoa? Or Chalan Laulau? No one there likes, buys, watermelon?</P>

- I have always found much to admire about Palau, from its Rock Islands to its story-board carvers to its bais and dive sites. I've also found much to admire in its governance, particularly the strong pro-environment stance of its present governor, Tommy Remengesau. Now comes yet another element to admire: its upcoming constitutional convention will consider changing from a presidential to a perhaps unicameral parliamentary form of government. At least they're willing to consider change.....</P>

- One should not belittle the apology offered by the U.S. Senate earlier this week - after more than a hundred years - to the nearly 5,000 mostly black males documented as having been lynched between 1880 and 1960. According to a Reuters release in Monday's Marianas Variety, the Senate "formally apologized for having blocked decades of effort to make lynching a federal crime." Though passed by the House on three occasions, and endorsed by seven U.S. presidents, largely southern members of the Senate have prevented such a bill from becoming law.</P>

Frustratingly enough, the article does not indicate whether such a law is finally in place, or if not, whether this Senate will now support such a bill.</P>

But it makes for interesting timing that the U.S. is apologizing for one form of terrorism while at the same time persisting in continuing with so many others, from torturing prisoners held without charge, to "rendering" prisoners to countries known to use torture, and generally denying rights to political dissidents.</P>

- The Commonwealth Telecommunications Commission has finally issued its order granting Pacific Telecom Inc the right to take ownership of Verizon, - but the road is still not clear, the process still not finished. CTC's 107-page order came with a caveat: any of the parties may request, within the next 30 days, a rehearing or reconsideration of the terms of the order, should they so wish; and the order leaves unresolved the issue of ownership of the underwater fiber-optic cable. A separate 46-page order sets out procedures for doing so, but does not settle the issue.</P>

Given the urgency of the need to find new sources of revenue, and given the fact that investors have already expressed interest in developing telecommunication-based businesses in the CNMI, it would certainly seem to the CNMI's advantage to do all it can to expedite resolution of the cable issue, rather than letting resolution proceed at the same leisurely pace as was followed in negotiation of the basic agreement. Let us hope it does not take another year and nine months..... </P>