

On My Mind  
8/12/05

While there's been much opposition to the recently-imposed fuel surcharge, its imposition has had one positive result: people are finally taking energy conservation seriously - everyone from the governor on down. While the CNMI Energy Office has been preaching energy conservation from the very beginning - until now, no one paid very much attention, what with fuel as freely available and as inexpensive as it was.</P>

But with the surcharge in place, more people are finally heeding the Energy Office's advice and buying into energy-saving strategies: buying the lower-wattage fluorescent bulbs, turning down airconditioners, turning off lights, even painting or cleaning roofs. And all of it is even being carried out within government agencies. It's high time.</P>

Of course, whether all government agencies will actually receive separate utility bills - they are not yet all individually metered - and even more questionable, whether they will actually pay them out of their own agency budgets as they have been told to do, given that utility cost had not been included in their calculations, remains to be seen. But it is a promising start.</P>

Let us hope that should the fuel surcharge be dropped - through whatever alternative scheme - the energy-savings strategies will not, that they will continue to be practiced by both the public and private sectors. After all, energy savings isn't really only a local concern - the need to conserve dwindling fuel supplies - and to find other sources of energy - are world-wide issues.</P>

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Other energy-related ruminations: former CUC Executive Director, present chairman of the House utilities committee and Covenant candidate for Lt. Governor Tim Villagomez's triple-purpose bill: to wipe out CUC's debt with CDA, repeal the surcharge, and raise power rates is, of course, appealing to the general public, but whether his putting into one bill proposals that have failed when they were considered singly will succeed is another question altogether. Moreover, it is unclear just where government would be expected to find the money required to pay the increase from \$.16 to \$.39/kw that is being proposed in Villagomez' bill.</P>

If the information included in Pacific Petroleum CEO Richard Reddy's open letter to the governor published in this past Tuesday's <EM>Saipan Tribune</EM> is correct, it would appear that the present attempt to privatize CUC can only spell disaster. According to Reddy, whoever takes on the privatization is obligated to buy fuel under CUC's existing contract. And we all know that it is CUC's present fuel contract that is driving up CUC's costs. What private company would agree to such a crippling condition? And where would it make up the high costs incurred? In shoddy equipment? Lack of maintenance? Untrained operators? Or higher rates? Whatever the answer, it would appear that as a result, the people will only lose.</P>

Today's <EM>Tribune</EM> headline doesn't help matters. It reads, "Massive leaks at power plant." The truth of the matter is that there is a potential for massive leaks - not only at the power plant but in pipes leading to the plant - but that at the moment, the "massive leaks" exist

only at one of 14 generators. The <EM>Tribune</EM> has been working hard to improve its image and increase its credibility. Such sensationalism doesn't help.</P>

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Wednesday's <EM>Pacific Daily News</EM> featured, on its op-ed page, an article that claimed there was no need to worry about oil shortages that would disrupt the economy - now or in the future - because there really isn't - and won't be - an oil shortage. In the short term, argues author Daniel Yergin, world-wide production capacity will increase, alleviating the present perception of a shortage.</P>

In the future, Yergin claims, technology will solve the problem. Oil will be sourced from what he calls unconventional oil: "oil sands, ultra-deep water developments, 'natural gas liquids'" - and these unconventional oil sources will be enough to meet demands.</P>

"Over the next few years," he writes, "new facilities will be transforming what are inaccessible natural gas reserves in different parts of the world into a quality, diesel-like fuel." He does admit that in the longer term there will likely be a shortage, but since increased production capacity will take care of the short term, that provides "breathing space to address the investment needs and the full panoply of technologies and approaches...that will be required to fuel a growing world economy, ensure energy security and meet the needs of what is becoming the global middle class."</P>

Yergin is chairman of Cambridge Energy Research Associates, and while that firm isn't mentioned in the list of conservative think tanks identified in "don't think of an elephant" by George Lakoff, a book I've mentioned earlier, it sure sounds like it could be. Lakoff says that such think tanks are spending enormous amounts of time and money to promote the conservative mind-set. Yergin, by implying there is no need to conserve fuel, improve gas mileage on cars, etc., would seem to fit right in.</P>

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Short takes:

- It has been observed that not enough legislators have enough "real" business experience to act wisely on laws affecting the conduct of business. Certainly, the action of the Senate earlier this week - which denied the Commonwealth Health Center's request that it be allowed to contract foreign workers for two year periods as a cost-saving measure - bears that out. CHC is battling high costs and staff shortages, yet the senators chose to ignore its director's recommendations for resolving both. Let's hope the conference committee that now must reconcile the House version with the Senate version has more sense.</P>

- On the other hand, House Minority Leader Arnold I. Palacios' plan to establish a single compensation rate for members of public boards and commissions, as described in this past Monday's <EM>Marianas Variety</EM>, seems like a very sound proposal for conducting the government's business more cost-effectively.</P>

- The enthusiasm expressed regarding the possibility of conducting the 2006 Micronesian Games in Saipan is encouraging. Let's hope reality isn't ignored in the decision, however. Among facilities that will require substantial upgrade is the Marpi swimming pool, which is said

to have major leaks. Repairing the pool and bringing it back up to standard will be a costly undertaking. The CNMI should exercise caution in committing itself to expenditures for which it has no budget and no resources.</P>

- Speaking of committing one's self to expenditures for which there is no budget, the allegation by Congressman Claudio K. Norita that with all the SCUBA diving in the CNMI, it should have a decompression chamber but doesn't is a good example. It's a good idea, but decompression chambers are expensive to acquire, operate, maintain and staff. Where would the money come from to provide all of that? And where does it rank against agency needs? It has been stated here before that there's nothing wrong with expecting divers to help pay for services and functions from which they benefit. A dollar-a-head tax on all divers does not sound unreasonable, and most divers, knowing their money would be spent for their benefit, would not object. The money could also be used for reef protection and preservation, buoy placement, etc.</P>

- On a related subject, does anyone know whether it would have cost more to hold a special election for a replacement for Ray N. Yumul's seat in the House - which has, in effect, been vacant for a year already - than it has to continue supporting him and his office in his absence? Yumul is presently serving with the armed forces in Iraq, and is apparently destined to stay there until early next year. Yet he has held onto his seat in the House, and is running again to retain it. I have the utmost respect for Ray Yumul, and for his decision to go on active duty with the U.S. Army Reserves. And I admit that I do not live in his election district. But nonetheless, I find it troublesome that he insists, at the same time, on remaining "on duty" in the legislature when he cannot fulfill those duties.</P>

- I stopped reading Dr. Camacho's letters very closely some time ago. They haven't seemed to add much to the discussion. His last, which appeared in this past Wednesday's <EM>Trib</EM> is typical: he regurgitates information that has already appeared in the paper without adding anything of significance, and then, in the last few paragraphs - and this is relatively new - he blames it all on the present administration, on the governor. Which leads me to wonder: is he by chance being paid by the opposition?</P>

- Somewhat belatedly, I would like to express my support for the effort made by the Tinian Mayor's office and the Tinian Municipal Council to promote peace and reconciliation between those who dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki sixty years ago, and those who suffered the consequences. And my support for their role in the campaign to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction. That USCOMNAVMAR chose not to participate was indeed a pity. Individual members of the military- on both sides - have come to terms with their former enemies. It's too bad that officials in the military could not do so as well. And the governor's absence? Inexcusable!</P>

- The coconut wireless has it that tangen-tangen in the CNMI is being harvested to provide Guam with charcoal for its barbecues, and as a result of the thinning out of the tangen-tangen, the invasive scarlet gourd is now growing more virulently than ever in our islands. Maybe we should insist that Guam grow its own tangen-tangen?</P>

- I hesitate to say it aloud, for fear it could bring bad luck, but the coconut wireless has also suggested that the reason Tanapag has suffered no rolling blackouts is because it is the governor's village. A blessing in disguise?</P>