

On My Mind

9/30/05

What is it about Thursdays? This coming Thursday, there will be two events I'd like to attend (a zoning board meeting and Howard Willen's presentation on presidential libraries), a third I've been invited to attend (an education forum) and one more I could attend (the Thursday night street market). I have yet to make it to one of the Humanities Council/Isla Conservation Alliance's Thursday night ethics discussions- though I've wanted to - due to a conflict of schedule.</P>

But my calendar generally doesn't show a thing for any other night of the week. Why is that? I've often thought we need a municipal, or island-wide, master calendar somewhere, so those who schedule events could check and see whether or what has already been scheduled for the time they had in mind. I thought that's what the calendar at cnmi.com was going to do, but that only lists Marianas Visitors Authority events - and even then it doesn't list the Thursday night street market.</P>

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Thursday night's street market. Whoever came up with the idea of putting it in the middle of the street now that the Paseo is finished? Wasn't the original intention to put it back where the Paseo now is - where it started?</P>

Instead, it's now in the street abutting the Paseo, and has become a major traffic problem. The street fronting the Hyatt is one way north, but the next street, which is still two-way, and can be used as a route to get to locations on the street in front of the Hyatt, now gets blocked by early Thursday afternoon in preparation for the market. Not only does that hinder traffic flow, it also hampers access to the street market. It takes away parking spaces, and what's worse, makes it difficult for vendors to get near enough to bring in the equipment for their booths.</P>

Is it that the "massage parlors" have enough clout to keep the market out of the Paseo - so fewer people will see who patronizes the parlors? And why couldn't it be made to work the other way - to create so much traffic that fewer people would patronize the parlors - at least one night a week? Wouldn't that be better????</P>

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Speaking of space use and planning, isn't it about time that the Marianas Public Land Authority came up with some alternatives for how it lays out homestead areas? As has been officially recognized, the amount of available public land is rapidly shrinking, so it would make sense to maximize what little is left. Instead, MPLA is laying out homesteads with smaller and smaller individual residential lots, which is both wasteful and inefficient - definitely not the best use of available land.</P>

A better approach would be to combine four lots, for example, build one four-family house in one corner of the lot, and leave the rest of the space open for greenery, recreation, planting shrubs or vegetables or flowers, etc. It is possible, nowadays, to build a four-family house so each has privacy and each is isolated, sound-wise, from its neighbors. If this pattern were repeated village-wide, there would be ample space for a school, a baseball field, basketball court, etc. As is the case in New Orleans, there's no law that says you have to build the same way people

have built before. This is an opportunity to be creative, re-examine the basic assumptions, and do things better. MPLA - are you listening????</P>

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Another area where MPLA should listen to common sense is in this business of charging utilities for use of public land. As Rip Stephanson pointed out in his letter to the editor, and Dr. Arkle expanded upon so tellingly in his letter to the editor, which was published by both the Marianas Variety and the Saipan Tribune, there is absolutely no justice in, no rationale for, requiring the new owners of Verizon/MTC to pay for underground phone lines put in over the years by its predecessor. If that had been a real issue, MPLA should have raised it lo these many years ago.</P>

Nor is there any justice in, any rationale for, exempting the Commonwealth Utilities Commission's water, sewer and power divisions from paying to put their lines through/under public land. And what about cable tv? Don't its wires encroach on public land as well? (Granted, cable tv does pay CUC for hanging its lines on the power poles - or at least it did at one time.)</P>

Of course, MPLA is not known for being reasonable, or logical, but that doesn't justify putting up yet another hurdle for the new owners of the phone company.</P>

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On the same note, don't you just love the way the legislature plays games with us all? Imagine waiting til the last week before it expires to take action on the law that allows foreign workers to be employed by various government agencies! And then still not getting agreement on how it should be renewed even the day before the deadline.</P>

Assuming some sort of provision is worked out by the end of today that allows CUC, the Departments of Public Works, Commerce and Public Health to continue hiring foreign workers, the bill will still need to be signed by the governor. Talk about crisis management!</P>

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In the meantime, the legislature - at least the Senate - frittered away its time this past week working on a bill that should never have reached the floor in the first place. The bill, Senate Bill 14-100, would require government agency regulations to be approved by the Legislature before they were put into effect. The Senate has obviously forgotten its function. Its job is not to micro-manage the various executive branch agencies.</P>

The function of the legislature - of which the Senate is part - is to set policy and, as its name indicates, to make laws. The enforcement of those laws, however, is then up to the respective agencies of the executive branch, which the agencies do, in part, by promulgating regulations - the rules - in accordance with which those laws are to be applied.. Getting the legislature involved in approval of regulations is not only an extreme case of micro-management, but it is also a violation of the separation of powers, and thus a total waste of time and effort.</P>

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One of several policies the legislature might better have spent time on is a broadening of the base on which doctors can be hired by the Commonwealth Health Center. Currently only U.S. or Canadian-trained physicians can be hired - and only from the U.S. or Canada, as I understand it.

However, just consider the number of people from the CNMI who go to the Philippines for medical treatment, some of which is even paid for by CNMI insurance. Wouldn't it be cheaper if those doctors seen by CNMI residents were allowed to practice in the CNMI?</P>

Then there's the story appearing in the Variety earlier this past week that notes that many people in the U.S. are traveling to India, Thailand and Singapore for first class surgery and treatments because - even including airfare - it is so much cheaper there than in the U.S. The doctors have been trained in the U.S., then take their skills back to their own country and "wait for business to come to them."</P>

So why can't CHC be allowed to bring those doctors here to practice?</P>

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Short takes:

- I am surprised at the exclusivity of Department of Commerce's Glen Manglona's suggestion that some sort of permanent resident status be offered only to foreign students, retirees and professionals in technical and managerial occupations. Granted that the proposal is pretty radical on its face, but that aside, what about the housekeepers, the laborers, the storekeepers who have lived on island for years and have already put roots down here? Besides, isn't it precisely the students and professionals that there is still hope the indigenous will replace some time in the future?</P>

- Several kudos' this week: to the Marianas Variety for its coverage of the court/Humanities Council co-sponsored workshops for the media and the courts held Thursday and Friday of this past week. Of course, with no week-end editions to get out, it was easier for the Variety's reporters to break free than it was for the Trib reporters. One conclusion of the workshop: more education and information exchange on the part of both sets of participants would be most useful. Let us hope that sees fruition.</P>

- Kudos also to Howard Willens and Deanne Siemer for the vast quantities of CNMI-related historical documents they have produced - in well-packaged and convenient format - and are now freely offering to teachers, schools, and researchers through the office of the Council for the Humanities. The compilations - of U.S. agency documents, presidential documents, and oral histories - are truly awesome in both scope and quantity! Sponsored in part by the Humanities Council, the two are on-island this week and next, and are giving presentations about the collections to government officials as well as the general public.</P>

- A reverse kudos of sorts: to the Marianas Eye Clinic for offering space to artists for the exhibition of their skills; and to the Clinic's Dr. Robertson for the very fine underwater photos on display in Susupe's "The Beans."</P>

- Coining a new word, some carps (as in "to carp," the verb): the fact that last week Hollywood Theater offered two "R" features, four "PG 13" features, and only "PG" movie, and that this coming week, the ratio is exactly the same. Maybe if I make this a regular feature of this column, someone will eventually do something about it? Either bring in more family-appropriate films, or open a "counter-culture" theater that doesn't offer only sex, violence,

and crudity?</P>

- Another carp: both papers ran articles on the need, by the local chapter of the National Forensic League, for volunteer judges, models, presenters, recruiters of competitors and public relations agents. But nowhere did they provide a contact point, so those interesting in volunteering could do so. If anyone knows one, please let me know!</P>

- Lastly, isn't the Variety going a little overboard in its practice of freedom of expression? Taking an anti-BB stance in its editorials is one thing. Promoting that stance throughout the paper is quite another - and quite possibly a violation of journalistic ethics....</P>