On My Mind 4/20/06

With neither fanfare nor forewarning, it was revealed yesterday that the governor was due to make his first "state of the Commonwealth" speech on the morning of Friday, the 21st, which is usually the time this column is finalized and posted. Rather than delay the column until after the presentation - since I can hardly not attend - this column will go out a day early. Admittedly, that's a gamble since what comments I make here may well look foolish after he has spoken. I am not much of a gambler at heart, but practicality leaves me little choice this time; otherwise it might be necessary to do considerable re-writing, and not put up the column til Saturday, which I am loathe to do.

Fitial will no doubt emphasize the overtures he has made to various and sundry potential new investors and the expected revenue to be generated therefrom. But as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs David Cohen has said, it takes time to get from an expression of interest to the actual implementation of specific projects. To date - at least so far as I am aware - not one of the proposed investors has filed a formal permit application with the Coastal Resources Management Office, the first substantive step in getting major developments off the ground, ceremonial groundbreakings or signing of memoranda of agreement notwithstanding.

The governor no doubt will also talk of the many steps he has already taken in an effort to cut costs from the inflated budget now in effect. What he will probably not mention is to what extent he could have saved more if he had not taken other steps that only added to government costs, such as the new cars he and the lieutenant governor both purchased, and the 300 positions he allegedly certified as vacant and eligible for filling. And what about the fuel costs he is not saving because he had not ordered government offices to turn up their thermostats?

Will he finally make it clear that the biggest issue is one of cash-flow for payroll? That the longer-term solutions don't really help with the immediate problem? That the "three payday months" aren't a real problem - there have always been 26 pay periods a year?

Will he try to throw out yet another poorly thought-through idea for cutting costs, on top of the already rejected ideas of cutting cabinet member salaries and cutting work hours and the floundering idea of cutting worker salaries?

We shall see.

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An idea that has not been put out for discussion is just shutting down government for a day. I am not sure how that would save money, unless people's salaries would reflect an eight hour cut in pay. If that were applied across the board, even to professionals, might it not save as much or more than the proposed 10% cut in just the "peons" salaries now being proposed?

What if the poker parlors were shut down one day a week, and the money usually spent there—spent in the private sector - in local stores and restaurants, etc.? Would the resulting increase in business gross receipts taxes have more of an effect, over time, than the 10% cut?

Or what if the double-dippers were forced to give up their retirement pay while working for the government? How big a savings would that provide? Would that solve the cash flow problem?

What if poker receipts were monitored as they should be? How much additional revenue would that provide?

What if the legislature were not made part-term, but the size of the House were cut? Which would save more?

There's a rather crude saying about getting the "most bang for the buck." It is actually a rather simplistic approach for evaluating a variety of options - you choose the one that provides the best, or most payback. In terms of cutting costs in government, not only have not all the options - short- or long-term - been identified, but neither have they all been properly evaluated.

It is hardly possible to make an intelligent decision without doing both.

Nor is there much evidence that the long term impact of any of the ideas that have been proposed has been considered, either.

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The governor recently mentioned the idea of centralizing government in a new building in the Susupe area. Will he mention, discuss, that in his presentation? It will be interesting, to say the least, to hear how he will justify the use of CIP funds for its construction, given the condition of roads, public schools, and the many other candidates already overdue for capital improvement.

And what is it about CIP funds that prevents their being re-programmed, anyway? Apparently other federal funds are being diverted - what's to keep CIP funds from suffering the same fate?

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One thing is certain - the governor won't win any friends by his decision, made public this past Wednesday, that he will not grant either administrative or advanced leave to any government employee in the executive branch who plans to participate in the 6th Micronesian Games scheduled to take place on Saipan in June.

Instead, he urged those involved to save up their earned leave. But with only two or at the most three more paydays until the games take place, that would amount to no more than $1 \frac{1}{2}$ days for those earning four hours of leave per pay period - hardly enough to cover the time needed to prepare, set up and staff the activities, for athletes to undergo final training and actually participate.

He was originally opposed to the holding of the Micronesian Games at all this year - at least in the CNMI. Is this his way of getting even for having been outvoted?

What purpose can such a grinch-like attitude serve? Don't government employees - threatened with cuts in pay or payless paydays, losing out on within-grade promotions, doing without increases in salary - deserve at least a paid day off for hosting their Micronesian guests, for representing their islands at this event? And how much money will this save, anyway?

If the governor wants to make a point about abuses in the use of administrative or advanced leave, there are much more civil, fair, balanced ways to go about it than to punish island athletes and the rest of the people who are working so hard to make the Games possible.

Or is this another idea - just flung out without forethought - that he will have to recant?

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The formation of a new group calling itself the Karma Klub would seem rather timely at this point. The original concept was to form a women's group that met monthly, with each

attendee/member donating \$20 per meeting for use as a humanitarian donation to those in need. It was spurred by the discovery that Karidat, the NMI's social welfare agency, does not always have enough on hand to provide much help to those in need. If the threat of payless paydays becomes real, there may be an even greater need for such help.

The group had its initial meeting last week, raising \$400 which it was decided to give to Karidat this month, and is scheduled to meet again for lunch on Tuesday, May 16, at the Taste of India in restaurant in Garapan. The meeting is open to all interested women, each of whom is encouraged to bring a friend. For more information, contact Ericka Frink, instigator of the Karma Klub, at <ericka@saipan.com>.

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There's something wrong with the structure and organization of CNMI's dive industry when divers can go off on a 170 foot dive without having to prove that they have the experience to do such extreme diving. Normal sport diving depth is a maximum of 100 feet - and even so, most sport dives go no deeper than 60 or 70 feet - after all, the deeper one goes, the less time divers have available for staying under water.

According to Ken Concepcion, Department of Public Safety public information officer, the two divers who, according to a story in this past Tuesday's *Variety* had to be flown to Guam and put into a decompression chamber after having dived to 170 feet off the Hotel Nikko beach, were diving on their own. They had rented a boat from a dive shop, were using a special mixed gas air supply, but went out without a guide. Fortunately, according to Concepcion, both divers - who were certified - survived and have since left Guam.

Maybe, with these two divers, there wasn't any way to prevent their foolishness. Whether requiring tourist divers to pay a fee for diving here - a long-standing recommendation - would have made a difference is not clear. [Note: another untapped source of revenue!] But certainly the incident provides a wake-up call to the industry - which to date has been largely self-regulated - that perhaps better safety controls should be in place. Diving is one of the major water sports that draw tourists to the CNMI. It is important that it be seen a safe one.

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The *Pacific Daily News* reported on Wednesday that Beijing, China suffered a severe sandstorm this past Sunday. After the recent allegedly Asian pollution that hit Saipan recently, one wonders whether the CNMI will feel the effects of this one as well. Are there any local weather experts who can describe for the rest of us when and how wind flow patterns bring us Asian pollution, and within what time frame? Might be helpful to know such things....

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No movie tally this week, since this column is being posted a day early and new movie announcements don't come out until Friday.