

On My Mind

9/1/06

First, the corrections: it's Rebecca Warfield, not Debbie, who's just been named to head the Department of Public Safety. My apologies! There IS another Save the Grotto web site: <<http://www.savethegrotto.org/dfw.pdf>>. I hadn't been able to find it because I put a slash in front of "pdf" instead of the period. Also, I was also told it has nothing to do with DLNR, as it's hosted on a private server. My apologies! And lastly (mea culpa, mea culpa!), an administrative conference to assess the Fitial administration WAS held. However, according to the governor's press secretary, "this was not a public event. It was an internal organizational meeting in which the Governor gathered his cabinet and focused on meeting the goals of the administration."

Hmmm. How interesting! One would have thought there'd be some public pronouncements stemming from such a conference. Particularly since it was mentioned in the papers. Makes one wonder what really did take place. Was the assessment so dismal nobody wanted to make it public?

There's another correction to what appeared in last week's column, but this time it was not my error. The error was the fault of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which announced an intent to issue a permit for a wastewater treatment plant on Managaha. According to CNMI's Division of Environmental Quality, the issue is Tasi Tour's proposal to repair and upgrade an existing wastewater treatment plant on Managaha, and, moreover, there's no discharge of waters into the lagoon involved; wastewater flows into a leaching field. A corrected notice is expected to appear shortly.

Going back to the issue of the Grotto, the documents provided as a result of a Freedom of Information Act inquiry include a rather scary four-page undated, unsigned, unscribed paper that suggests that a wide stainless steel ladder be installed on the ocean side of the large rock to "facilitate ingress and egress from the water," that a pathway be built to the right of the lower stair landing "so walking tourists can experience a full view from a safe vantage point," and that diving platforms be installed along the walkway to make diving more safe for cliff-divers. Somewhat less scary were the suggestions that a flexible bridge be built between the large rock at the bottom and the base of the stairs, and placing markers outside the Grotto to guide divers back in.

The document also suggests allowing licensed businesses to operate concession stands in the upper area that would offer snacks and drinks to divers after or between (!) dives and to bussed tourists, as well as souvenir hats, t-shirts, fish, turtle, and shark carvings and similar items. The income generated from the concessions, the author of this document states, might pay for security and maintenance of the area.

Other goodies gleaned from the FOIA documents: "The monorail runs on the rail fixed to the base rock. A rail is fixed to a base rock with an anchor bolt." The monorail's riding cart is expected to carry five persons at a time including a driver. The speed: "about per minute 45m" - whatever that means. Elsewhere it is noted that it will go and come back in about 4 minutes. A fare of \$5.00 one way or \$10.00 round trip is proposed, with locals, handicapped or those between 55 and 65 at half price, and accompanied children and those over 65 going for free.

Though not yet in writing, the coconut wireless has it that the company has retreated from

its original plan to use a diesel engine, and will now proposes to use an electric one, to avoid the risks of fuel spills, leaks and air pollution.

Begins to sound like a Disney park, doesn't it?

If you haven't read Bruce Bateman's "Sour Grapes" column on page 11 of the 8/28 issue of the *Saipan Tribune*, I would urge you to do so. He explains far better than I have been able to just why it is so silly to use the "access for the handicapped" argument as a reason for putting a monorail at the Grotto. He asks, for example whether we shouldn't construct an escalator to enable the handicapped to get to Forbidden Island, or an elevated concrete walkway with guardrails and a moving sidewalk conveyer for access to diving over the reef at Laulau.... Right on, Bruce!

Congratulations to the Chamber of Commerce for putting together its very timely "Focus on Energy" Roundtable, held yesterday. With the exception of one speaker, who provided insultingly old and outdated information, the speakers were good to excellent, and the information offered both helpful and relevant, as well as thought-provoking. A goodly number of legislators and government officials were in evidence, though only Absalon S. Waki stuck it out 'til the end. Unlike previous governors, who would have left after their address and returned only when they were again expected on-stage, acting governor Tim Villagomez stayed throughout the entire proceedings.

Energy gurus' favorite mantra - the best way to save on energy costs is to use less of it - which was repeated by nearly every speaker - surprised some attendees, who said they'd expected to hear more about alternative energy sources. And while solar, wind, and bio-diesel were discussed as being proven technologies that did have relevance to the Marianas, the bottom line remains: the way to save energy (and therefore money) is to use less of it, and to improve the efficiency of its generation, delivery and application.

As keynote speaker David Schaller put it, energy conservation does less with less; energy efficiency does more with the same or less.

Particularly noteworthy were Guam Power Authority John Cruz' description of plans to install sea water air conditioning systems in Tumon hotels; Darren Kimura's presentation on the value and meaning of the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Star program (see the web site <www.energystar.gov>); and Ven Medabalmi's presentation on project financing. While complex, Medabalmi's talk was accompanied by a 50-page print-out of his power point slides; copies may still be available from the Chamber.

Key points over-all: The CNMI must begin to change its present approach to power generation, distribution and financing now, not later; energy audits are essential to improving efficiency; planning ahead is crucial to effective energy programs; experts should be called in to share their expertise; there is no single best answer, but numerous choices are available at every turn; and most fundamental of all, increasing the amount of energy NOT used is the fastest, cheapest, simplest way to save on power costs.

Speakers made much of solar water heaters - perhaps not all that useful here in the CNMI not only because of typhoons (the heaters are usually placed on the roof), but also because local

water has too high a mineral content, which tends to clog the pipes). A better idea is to shut water heaters off when not in use, or take cold showers.

Speakers also made much of re-lamping: replacing incandescent light bulbs with fluorescent bulbs and adjusting light levels - one does not need strong lights in corridors, for example - a strategy that can save up to \$50 a year for every bulb replacement. The hotel's lack of fluorescent lighting in the meeting room was noted, as were the hot spot-lights speakers had to endure up on stage. (The hotel did turn down its airconditioning as the afternoon wore on.....)

White paint on roofs - which reflect the sun's heat, rather than absorbing it - was also mentioned frequently as an energy-savings strategy.

CUC's deputy director for operations Patrick Deleon Guerrero came in for quite a grilling during the final question-and-answer segment. He noted that the rate increases are working: CUC is beginning to pay vendors off, is beginning to build a reserve. He held out hope that rolling black-outs would end once September's fuel delivery was made.

It should be noted that despite the hardship the fuel rate increase has caused, at least everyone is now finally taking seriously the need to conserve energy, to seek alternatives, to improve efficiency. Much of what was presented yesterday was not new. In the past, with fuel costs subsidized by government, there had been no motive for reducing fuel costs. Now there is.

Let us hope, however, that CUC does not respond in haste, but makes sure its privatization effort is fair, open and forward-looking.

Lastly, the *Tribune* also deserves kudos for its ample coverage of conference highlights, speakers, the Trade Expo.

Short Takes:

Kudos to Tinian's Dr. Arkle, for his sensible and logical letters on the energy situation in general, and Tinian's in particular. Wouldn't it be nice if CUC had such an informed and articulate spokesperson? Better yet, wouldn't it be nice if CUC had such an informed and articulate person at its head????? Though I confess to reservations regarding the nuclear energy solution he proposes in today's *Trib*.

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Used to be, the Public School System published an orientation booklet for new teachers. It gave some background on the CNMI, its people and its culture, among other things. Nowadays, as I understand it, though there is a "mentor" program at PSS, it has nothing to do with acculturating new non-local teachers to local customs, beliefs, lifestyles.

I can't imagine being thrown into the classroom without any preparation for the differences that exist between cultural patterns, lifestyles, in the CNMI and elsewhere! Talk about cruel and unusual punishment! Not to mention how adversely it must affect their ability to teach effectively....

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Movies this week: 2 PG's, 3 or 4 PG-13's depending on which paper you consult, and 2 or 3 R's, again, depending on the paper. The *Variety* rates "World Trade Center" as "R," the *Trib* - and the web site "Rotten Tomatoes" - as PG-13. Wonder where the *Variety* gets its ratings?

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