On My Mind 9/15/06

One reader of my column asked, in response to last week's commentary on the "austerity holiday," why the many paid CNMI government holidays could not be added to the list of "austerity holidays" - that is, unpaid. There are 14 of them, according to the list I have. Think of the savings that would mean!

Another reader responded along different lines. This reader wrote: "The 'austerity' part of austerity holiday was necessary to denote those employees who do not work every other Friday and do not get paid for not working; the 'holiday' part of austerity holiday is meant to be for those who do not work every other Friday but do get paid for not working (legislators, judges and court employees, contract hires, etc.). I thought that pretty clever.

And speaking of which, I suppose one should give credit to the legislators who have agreed to voluntarily give up 10% of their salaries - that's quite unusual, given that ordinarily, legislators are more apt to try find ways to add to their income.

Yet I must say I find it somewhat hypocritical, when those legislators continue to receive several hundred thousand dollars in allowances of one sort or another, that they are willing to "sacrifice" 10% of only the smallest part of the funding they receive.

While most people would not see it that way, particularly at first, there is a silver lining to the bi-weekly "austerity holiday." It provides a full eight-hour day to non-working employees that they could use to do something else. If they like to fish, maybe they can go fishing, and sell their catch to earn more money. If they like to carve, maybe they could make more carvings to sell - from shell, wood, coconut shells. People who feel they'd like to go into a different business could take that one day a week and try it out.

As Saipanpreneur Walt Goodridge likes to say, people could find their passion, and turn it into profit. A good example is the start-up of "mobile car detailing" described in last Friday's *SaipanTribune*. Fernando Muleta has set up a one-man business going to people's houses to detail their cars. The passion could be sewing, growing flowers or plants, raising vegetables, writing ads, repairing cars, conducting yoga classes - the possibilities are limitless. And if more encouragement is needed, Goodridge has started a series in this week's *Trib* on steps to success in starting one's own business.

It would be a shame to waste such an opportunity! And who knows - it just might be the beginning of a whole new career!

More and more often the coconut wireless is carrying talk about how much better off the CNMI would be if it had only a part-time legislature. First of all, it would significantly reduce the costs of government. And, word goes, it would open the legislature to a much larger number and variety of candidates, since it would allow the members to continue working outside the legislature.

The question, of course, is how to get something like that enacted. It does not seem that changing to a part-time legislature would require a constitutional amendment. The CNMI Constitution does not specify that the legislature must be full-time. And while some legislators

have shown themselves to be willing to sacrifice for the greater good of the Commonwealth as a whole, one wonders whether that willingness would go so far as to allow passage of a law reducing the terms of their successors to half-time instead of full-time.

Concerns have been expressed about conflict of interest, but a National Conference of State Legislators report reveals that only four states have full-time legislatures - California, Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania. Another seven have nearly full-time legislatures, but the remaining 39 work only 2/3 time or less at their jobs as legislators; nearly half - seventeen - work only half time.

If there's a conflict of interest issue, surely a solution to the CNMI concern can be found among the 39 states who don't work full time either.

Another badly needed legislative reform is a reduction in the size of the House. The Constitution provided for 14 members - twelve from Saipan, and one each from Rota and Tinian.

Unfortunately - or fortunately, as the case may be - the Constitution allows the legislature itself to change the number of its members. Wonder if the members would now be willing to reduce its numbers back to the original 14?

No doubt the reduction to a part-time legislature would save more money, but every little bit helps, and the reduction in over-all size would certainly be in keeping with the government's austerity program, not to mention being at least a little more appropriate to the CNMI's population than the present 18 members.

I don't think a reduction in the size of the Senate would work. Reducing it to six leaves an even number, and could conceivably leave the Senate even more dysfunctional than some say it already so often is.

Perhaps if the public community pressured its legislators, the legislators might be willing to enact such legislation? If not, one could elect, at the mid-term elections, only those legislators who support a part-time legislature......

(Updated copies of the NMI Constitution are available from Marianas Printing for only \$10.)

Calendar conflicts continue: this Saturday, the Association of Commonwealth Teachers is holding a "teacher gathering, fellowship of and among personnel, a post-Praxis test bash, a membership drive" pot-luck, b.y.o.b. party at Kilili Beach across from the Ada gym from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m; on the same day, the Red Cross is holding its Club 200 fund-raiser at the World Resort from 5:00 to 10:00 p.m.

Also on Saturday, the JoeTen-Kiyu Library is conducting the Grand Opening of its new children's library, formally known as the "Children of our Homeland Social/Cultural/Family Preservation Center." While on the same day, that function doesn't actually overlap either of the others - it's from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

The new children's area is well worth taking time to visit. It is most impressive - lots of space, lots of books, lots of comfortable seating.

I suppose one should be grateful, in this particular instance, that the new show at the Capitol Hill gallery of the Commonwealth Council for Arts and Culture is not open on Saturdays and thus does not add one more conflict to the day.

But the hours for the show, Cultural Heritage and Arts Pacifika - a display of paintings, weavings, artifacts and beadwork - don't really lend themselves to viewing or attendance at all. The show is only open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Of course, people could come see it on their "austerity holiday." But it does seem a shame that the Friends of the Arts, for example, couldn't come up with volunteers to open the gallery for at least a few hours on the week-ends. It also seems a pity that staff of the Council couldn't be persuaded to take time off during the week in order to staff it on week-ends.

On the other hand, historically speaking, attendance during week-end hours at Council exhibits have been abysmal.

Short takes:

I thought the invitation by the acting governor to the president of the Saipan Chamber of Commerce to sit in on CUC board meetings rather condescending. According to the Chamber president, while the Chamber has repeatedly offered to meet with the governor, after eight months in office no such meeting has yet occurred. Attendance at a government agency board meeting as an observer is not quite the same as actively participating in seeking solution to mutual problems.

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I've been given to understand that those involved in putting together and passing the Energy Conservation Bill were not happy with my comments last week. I have no quarrel with the basic intent of the law. Many of my concerns had to do with the use of language, with jargon, with what some people refer to as "terms of art." The law contains innumerable instances of arbitrary and/or careless word use, of dense language, that make its provisions difficult to understand.

Which raises the question as to for whom laws are written, and whether lay persons should expect to be able to understand the laws that govern them.....

"The U.S. and Europe are constantly improving their defense against the last murder, not the next one." Isn't that a scary thought? It comes from a speech given by Haim Harari, Chair of the Davidson Institute of Science Education and himself an Arab, at a meeting of the International Advisory Board of a large multi-national corporation, April, 2004. The full text can be found at <u>http://www.worldthreats.com/middle_east/Haim%20Harari.htm.</u>

Does anyone know who Holani Smith - the person writing all those long pro-administration letters in the *Trib* - is? Maybe it shouldn't be mentioned in the same place, but does anyone know who's behind "Fanquentos.com"? Anonymity and aliases do have their uses, and I can see not wanting one's anti-administration stance known, but why would anyone not want their pro-administration stance known?

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Movies for this week: 4 R's, 3 PG-13's, 1 PG. The only new film, "Gridiron Gang," did

not get a high "Rotten Tomatoes" rating, but seems like it might be an entertaining film, nonetheless.