

On My Mind
2/22/08

A Beautify CNMI! sub-committee has begun working on the development of a trail system on Saipan that would go along the backbone of the ridge connecting Susupe Lake to Suicide Cliff. It's envisioned that eventually the other existing trails will connect to the "spine" and extend further south as well. The expectation is that the trails will attract more tourists to Saipan, including hikers among the military scheduled to move to Guam, as well as providing recreation to island residents.

When told about the project one islander, who's been known to go deer hunting in Saipan's boonies, asked, "But what about tourist safety? Thieves will just hide in the jungle and pick on the hikers along the trail."

To which the retort was made, "Thieves will know better. Hikers don't take valuables on the trail. They'll leave them in the car. That's where the problem will be."

In either case, it's a sad commentary on the perception - and perhaps the reality - that too many individuals in this society seem more interested in satisfying their own needs than in supporting the well-being of the entire community. Creating additional tourist attractions such as the trails system brings benefits to the whole island - increased revenue to the hotels, jobs for the community, customers for farmers, fishermen, car rentals, retail stores, business for the banks and communication businesses and on and on and on. Everyone benefits in one way or another if the number of tourists increases (up to a point, of course, but that's another story).

In contrast, only a few people benefit if tourists are robbed. But the consequences don't end there. The tourists who were robbed will carry that story back to their friends and neighbors and colleagues, all of whom will then also have negative feelings about visiting Saipan, and the number of tourists who come here will go down. That hurts the entire community - whose well-being depends on how tourists are treated, what tourists say about their experiences on island, how the tourist industry fares.

The question is whether those intent on robbing tourists can be reached. Can they be convinced that they are hurting their own well-being by their acts? That instead of scaring tourists away, they would fare far better in the long run if they helped tourists to feel safe, to enjoy Saipan?

There is, on island, a group called the Marianas Tourism Education Council. It has, according to a recent *Saipan Tribune* story, just elected a new board of directors. Its mission: "...to foster and improve community

understanding and support for the visitor industry, educate the general public, especially students, about the value, social benefits and economic contributions made to the community by the tourism industry" and promote the 'hafa dai' spirit..... It's been in existence since 2002.

Given its mission statement, it is clear that the responsibility for educating the general public on the value and benefit of the tourism industry belongs to the MTEC. However, it would appear it has been directing its efforts primarily at students and young adults. It is increasingly obvious that that is not enough. The Council needs to address a far broader audience.

For example, if more people understood the importance, to tourists, of being able to see eagle rays, turtles, or live corral, and understood, as well, the benefit of the tourist presence to their own well-being, inappropriate takings of such species would not occur, and those who did take - and thereby despoiled tourist values - would be more often identified and appropriately charged.

MTEC must do far more to educate the entire community - in all its diversity - about tourism needs and interests, and the impact of those needs and interests.

Not until a significant majority of island residents believe, understand and act on the fact that tourism benefits them personally and directly will the attacks on tourists decrease and tourists once again feel safe, will tourist sites be left intact, will the CNMI's tourism industry flourish.

In short, everyone on island is a stake holder in the tourism industry. It is MTEC's responsibility to make sure everyone fully understands that.

The most telling of Representative Tina Sablan's press releases to date is her February 20 statement, "*On the use of public funds for charitable donations, and the budget of the legislature.*" She notes that she objected to the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) of 349 employees set for the legislature, but was told that "349 people were not actually employed. That number was set just to provide 'flexibility' to the legislators to hire staff that they might need." Writes Sablan, "I stated that a legislature that gives itself a ceiling of 349 FTEs that it does not actually need is essentially advertising itself as an employment agency."

"I also said that rather than have each individual legislator picking and choosing which causes to support through the discretionary funds [the budget proposes that members get \$105,000 each, presiding officers \$175,000], we should simply cut our own budgets and appropriate those funds to the programs and agencies that we all agree are priorities. In other words, "donations" using public funds are not donations at all, but an unfair and selective allocation of taxpayer dollars.

"Further, legislators who spend time and public funds providing certain municipal services are perpetuating the inefficient and costly practice of duplicating government functions and inadequately appropriating funds to the

agencies that are tasked with providing those same services – and if we know that already, then we should put a stop to it." Sad to say, not one of the members present supported her recommendation. The full text of her statement can be found at < <http://www.tinasablan.com/forum/> >.

If my numbers are correct, those "discretionary" funds total \$2,240,000. That would allow 300 people to be cut from payroll - and provided nearly \$7,500 each - to pay for a business license, start a small landscaping or house-painting, or trash collection business, for example, to buy equipment, stimulating the private sector, or start classes at NMC - or, if lumped together, go a long way towards solving CUC's problem, or CHC's or PSS', or the Retirement Fund's.....

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- Looks like those wielding bush cutters around the new Veteran's cemetery need lessons: seems they've come too close and stripped the bark

from all the newly planted trees.

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In it she notes that instead of \$155,000 each, this year the legislature is proposing to allot to each member \$105,000 each in discretionary funds, with the respective presiding officers receiving \$175,000 instead of up to \$400,000 each, which she then proposed be cut even further to \$75,000 for each member and \$100,000 for the presiding officers. None of the members of the legislature supported her recommendation.

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It is somewhat dismaying to realize, however, that the last legislature passed 128 new laws. Surely that sets a record of some sort?

Department of Corrections Lino Tenorio was quoted in the Trib earlier this week as saying that the new prison could accommodate up to 500 inmates, based on a projected of prison population. Wouldn't it have been nice if he'd said, instead, that the

Will be interesting to watch which of the outgoing members of the House find new positions with the government...

Then there's Lower Base. Along the shore of the lagoon. More potential prime real estate on public land, which is instead being dirtied, polluted, abused, kept out of the market. Yes, it's convenient to have container yards and oil storage tanks close to the harbor, but "close" is, after all, relative. To move some of those facilities inland, away from the lagoon, would mean a distance of only a few miles. Rehabilitating the area might take some doing, but it makes no sense to keep it dirty just because it always has been.

Public land should be used for the benefit of everyone, but much of the public land that comprises Lower Base - especially along the shore - does not. Isn't it time this was re-evaluated as well? Not all commercial dock space has to be ugly, after all. In some cities, they have been redeveloped into profitable tourist attractions.

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Some of those, who'd been there before, even expressed their pleasure at being re-elected in terms of how much they liked their "job" and how happy they were to have their "jobs" back.

Excuse me, but when did being a legislator become a "job"? Aren't legislators, who make the laws the rest of us must live by, supposed to be representatives of the people who elected them? Aren't they supposed to be working on laws that help the community, that represent the people's best interests, that improve the lives of their constituents, and the economy? Aren't they supposed to be answering to the people? Serving the people?

Perhaps it was just a poor choice of words, because doing all those things could be considered a "job" too, but I would have much rather heard those legislators say they were happy to [again] be in a position to work towards helping their people and their community prosper, towards improving education, towards improving the infrastructure.

Prime real estate on Capital Hill another neglected asset....

- While it's been mentioned that military build-up plans should include measures to prevent the brown tree snake from entering the CNMI, there's been no mention of taking measures to prevent any other kind of invasive species - be it mollusks, rodents, insects or what-have-you - from entering. Equipment and ships themselves could easily act as carrier carriers for such pests, particularly if they come direct from Okinawa, where safeguards may not be in place to check out-going cargoes.

"There are good reasons to begin with a presumption against government action. As coercive monopolies that spend other people's money taken by force, governments are uniquely unqualified to solve problems. They are riddled by ignorance, perverse incentives, incompetence and self-serving." From "Don't look to gov't to cool down planet" by John Strossel in opinion column in MV, 11/21/07, p 12 from "Townhall")

Short takes:

- It's too late to vote in most primaries on the mainland, but it is not too late to register to vote in the elections in November. Anyone who has ever established a residence in the U.S. (or Alaska) and is a citizen of the U.S. is eligible to vote in the national elections under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA).

For information about obtaining an absentee ballot, go to < <http://www.fvap.gov/> > , download the Registration and Absentee Ballot Request Form, fill it out and send it in. The site < <http://www.fvap.gov/pubs/vag/html> > provides a list of states and the addresses to which the application for the absentee ballot should be sent. To fill in the form on-line go to < <http://www.fvap.gov/pubs/onlinefpca.pdf> >.

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