

On My Mind
12/26/08

The New Year is about to begin, and I find it enormously satisfying to be able to think - for the first time in many years - that this year we will actually have a person of high intelligence, integrity, industriousness and commitment over there in Washington, D.C., running our country. Barack Obama will have a very hard time, given the many crises he will be facing, and I don't expect he will get them all under control right away, but at least I can be confident that he will work hard to find the best way to do what is necessary. I find that very reassuring!

And, of course, in sharp contrast to what we have here, whom we have running the CNMI!!!! - with no confidence, either, that enough members of the government are working hard enough (together) to find the best way to do what is necessary. November '09 sure is a long way off!

Looking at the potential slate of candidates - as well as non-candidates - I'd have to say that I don't see anyone even close to the model set by Obama except Tina Sablan. She has fought custom, tradition, habit, whatever you want to call it, from the very beginning of her campaign for a seat in the House, and she made it. She continues to fight the status quo and, moreover, has initiated some admirable new practices, particularly the sharing of legislative calendars, agendas, memos, documents, etc., with the media and the general public. She is frugal to the extreme with her budget. She is unafraid, and relentless, in pursuing what she believes is necessary and important.

Should Tina run for governor? Right now - with all due respect for Joe Ayuyu - I don't see a better candidate!

Which brings to mind Father Fran Hezel, and what he's written in the latest issue of *Micronesian Counselor*, "What are our priorities?" Hezel is writing of the Federated States, not the CNMI, but much is applicable here nonetheless. In this issue he discusses health, education, care of the outer islands, economic development, charting progress, and integrating the approach to social problems. In regard to health, he notes that "When offered resources to do dozens of other things to satisfy Federal grant requirements, we would do well to remember that our priorities ought to guide our use of funds, not the other way around."

On education, he notes that there are few jobs available in the islands at present, and for those going abroad, "academic skills will prove much more useful than welding and carpentry." Schools should stop promoting everyone into the next grade, because this "creates an illusion of successful education while in fact imposing a huge burden on the local colleges to engage in remedial work." The "norms for appointing and retaining school principals should be re-examined," he continues, noting "It's more important that the principal be an effective manager than a degree holder." "When it comes to good schools, management makes the difference - not the degree that the principal has. It's

even more important than the quality of the teachers in the schools," he insists.

On higher education, Hezel writes, "College is not a retirement home; it is meant to be a systematic program for advanced learning....If a student does not meet a set of predetermined goals for improvements after his initial year in college, that student should not be permitted to continue for a second year. It might lessen the Pell grant income for the colleges, but it would do wonders for the motivation of the students."

As far as economic development is concerned, Hezel notes that previous economic development plans have failed and the government will have to re-think its priorities. To begin with, he urges that FSM "work with the Asian Development Bank... to help it reassess its expectations of Pacific Island economies and its strategies for dealing with development. Its present high expectations have rarely been met anywhere in the Pacific, suggesting there is something wrong with its formula for development. Factors that need to be considered include the effect that island "subsistence affluence" has on productivity, the relatively high costs of funding small nation states and maintaining their dispersed public services and the dearth of resources available."

While Hezel notes that "the U.S. should be a party to this conversation so it can adjust its own expectations of what is attainable at the end of the present Compact period," this could also apply to the U.S.' expectations of what is attainable in the CNMI.

In regard to social problems, Hezel observes that "Hotlines, school counseling services, and safe houses for abused women may have their value in the U.S., but they have not proven very helpful in Micronesia. If so many of the social problems we face today appear to have their roots in cultural change, especially change occurring in the family and the community, perhaps it would make sense to examine them in their cultural context. When we ask ourselves what a traditional community would have done to prevent these problems, we may be on the way to discovering solutions that work. A consolidated approach toward social problems that is rooted in a cultural understanding of what is happening might produce richer results for everyone."

Much food for thought!

Public Law 15-127, signed into law on 2/05/08, states that "Selling fireworks or firecrackers from any temporary stand located along any street, highway or right of way is prohibited in the Commonwealth. No roadside vending of fireworks or firecrackers shall be allowed in the Commonwealth."

The law also states that "No fireworks, as defined in this Section, shall be permitted for sale, possession, or use in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands..." unless consigned to the government, or authorized for display by the Fire Chief. (One assumes "display" to mean a fireworks show, not a shelf full of fireworks displayed for sale.) Could anything be clearer?

Yet, according to the coconut wireless, several temporary stands have set up for business on Saipan this year. And fireworks, including those super-loud bombs, abound.

WHY ISN'T THIS LAW BEING ENFORCED???????

Short takes:

Our fiscally irresponsible governor not only has authorized an EXTRA paid holiday by declaring Friday, 12/26, a holiday, and no doubt will do the same for 1/02/09, but has also refused to sign the budget - over which the legislature has so struggled mightily - into law.

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A Bah! Humbug! as well to the Bank of Guam, Garapan branch, which is issuing receipts from its ATM machine that show only a coupon for Subway sandwiches, and the word "acknowledgment" but not the date, amount of money, or type of transaction involved. Some customer service! Subway sandwiches sure don't help me reconcile my bank statements!

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And the same to Deanne Siemer for attempting to pass off as a "joke" her disparaging comments about Representative Tina Sablan. Pretty warped sense of humor.....

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In contrast, kudos to *Saipan Tribune* reporter Kristi Eaton, who, according to one high-ranking government official, had not yet made any errors in her coverage of the recent Public Utilities Commission sessions - which were full of complexity. That's high praise indeed!

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Kudos, also, to Tony Pellegrino for his letter to Santa which appeared in Monday's *Trib*. A nice treatment of the CNMI's ills while retaining the Christmas spirit.

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The December issue of the *Commonwealth Register* is out. It includes proposed amendments to the rules and regulations of the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the Retirement Fund, and the Rota Gaming Commission. Copies are available at the AG's office and the Law library at Guma' Hustisia in Susupe.

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This week's column is out a day early because I've encountered a health problem for which I am momentarily awaiting referral to Honolulu, and while no departure date has yet been set, I wanted to be sure this got out..... Wish me well!