

On My Mind  
7/17/09

Should Tanapag's small public beach area be re-zoned from residential to commercial? The question will be up for discussion at a Zoning Board public hearing slated for next Thursday evening, July 23, at 6:00 p.m. at the Tanapag social hall.

The issue had been presented to the Zoning Board by the former operator of Mugen's Café Waft at the north end of Satoni Drive - a small dirt road that lies between Ste Remedios St and the lagoon - who allegedly lost his lease due to a disagreement with a partner over a loan, and now wanted to open his Café Waft at the other end of Satoni Drive. Toward that end, he has already taken a small house used, at one time, as a dive shop, and had it re-constructed, trimmed and equipped for use as a small restaurant and bar - without, apparently, first checking to see that it would meet zoning code requirements. Now he has asked the Zoning Board for a variance to change the present "residential" designation to "commercial" to accommodate his new Café Waft.

The Zoning Board, it seems, decided that as long as the issue had been raised for that part of the village, it might as well make the question a little broader, and ask whether that entire area across from the church - encompassing the ocean-side pala pala, the social hall, the playground and the boat ramp - should be re-zoned from residential to commercial, and that is the question that will be presented at Thursday's public hearing.

To begin with, it is questionable, in my mind, just how much of that area is appropriate for even residential development, much less commercial use, given how close it is to the water.

In the second place, I had been under the impression, when the playground there was first installed, that that area had been permanently designated a village park - though memory fails me as to whether this was through law, or a zoning provision, or some other means.

In the third place, that area and the social hall are in constant use by Tanapag residents - to launch their boats, to fish, as a practice field for traditional dance, as a playground, for parties, for family gatherings, to sit quietly and watch for a green flash as the sun sets, for church-related activities like rosaries and funerals.....It serves, in other words, as an important, easily accessible, social center for the village.

Nor is there any alternative, were that area to be commercialized, that could be used to perform the functions that area now does. There is one small "mom & pop" store that has been grandfathered in, but further commercialization of that area would destroy the integrity of the village, one of the last on island that has not been invaded and despoiled by now empty garment factories or their barracks.

One supposes the Zoning Board should be commended for choosing to address the issue of use of that area on a broader scale. Hopefully it will settle the question once and for all: Tanapag's beach front, vital to preservation of the community, should remain permanently closed to commercial development.

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When the CNMI's senior senator declares that it isn't necessary to hire skilled, trained, experienced guest workers to keep CUC's generators operating after Aggreko's contract ends in September of this year, because the CNMI has enough retired mechanics and electricians who could come together, form a company, and hire themselves out to CUC to take over the maintenance and operation of the generators (as reported in the 7/15 *Saipan Tribune*), you know the senator has been in office too long.

Senator, with all due respect, even if there were as many as 16 or 19 - the number CUC executive director Tony Muna has said are needed - retired mechanics and electricians out there, can you assure us that they are all in good health, that they are all current in their knowledge of the machinery and equipment at CUC, that they are all ready, willing and able to work full time - and overtime as required - on a reliable basis every day of the week? Can you assure us that they would be willing to get together and form a company? Or that CUC would hire them if if they did? And that that could all be accomplished in the next two months? I don't think so.

Yes, the CNMI should have been training its local residents to take over those jobs, but the plain and simple truth is that it has not, and that there are not, therefore, local residents available to take over from the present guest workers at CUC in September.

As I am dependent on power for my oxygen concentrator, and do not have a generator of my own, this is a very critical issue to me. I would hope, Senator, that even though your primary constituency is in Rota, in the interests of reliable power for the people of Saipan, you will promote and support the lifting of the cap for guest workers for CUC before disaster strikes again. Aggreko's contract runs out only two months from now, so there's not a lot of time left to resolve the issue.....

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On the national front, there is much concern that President Obama's economic stimulus package will leave the nation and its people with a huge debt for many generations to come. The same sentiments and cartoons - such as the one in the 7/16 *Marianas Variety* showing Uncle Sam telling a newborn baby that the baby owes him \$37,000 right from the start - apply to what the CNMI Legislature is trying to do to the people of the CNMI. If both houses of the legislature pass the proposed initiative that would authorize the CNMI to borrow money to pay off its debt to the Retirement Fund, it would also be burdening this and future generations with a huge debt - a debt that the people did not incur and from which they won't benefit.

In this instance, "letting the people decide" by proposing an initiative is a cop-out of the worst sort. The members of the legislature are being irresponsible cowards. Knowing that the CNMI is going to get some pretty unfavorable terms on any bond it tries to "float" - if indeed it is successful at all - the members should reject the idea of an initiative, and turn toward the many more feasible suggestions that have been made for

meeting the court-ordered obligation to pay off the Retirement Fund.

In addition, passage of the initiative by the legislature will merely postpone any real effort on the part of the administration to find ways to begin paying off its debt to the Retirement Fund - leaving the Retirement Fund to sink further and further into debt.

Moreover, if the initiative is passed - which would put the question on the November ballot for the people to vote on - funding would have to be found prior to the election to support education of the electorate on what's involved in floating bonds, in determining repayment terms, in the impact and implications for future generations - not an easy subject in any case! There's no point in wasting funds - that aren't there to begin with - on a question that isn't even worth asking.

The legislature should table the initiative, and get on with the real work: removing the cap on guest workers for CUC, sitting down at the negotiation table to find means to repay the Retirement Fund, reducing government so it can live within its means.

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Father Hezel, in the June '09 *Micronesian Counselor*, offers a new way of thinking about economic development in underdeveloped countries and small islands, and why it is that pouring money into them doesn't usually work. The "culture" of economic development, he writes, calls for a belief in the importance of individual effort, trust in broader institutions, the application of ethical standards to all, not just those in the immediate kin group, the ethic of hard work, autonomy and thrift. These values, he states, are all present in flourishing economies such as China, for example.

The "culture" of underdeveloped countries in Africa, in most Pacific islands, on the other hand, believes in the subordination of the individual to group interests, work only as required for immediate needs, in group sharing rather than individual saving, in conformity rather than autonomy.

Particularly in the islands, security, often in the form of land, a sense of belonging that encourages supporting family members, and the prestige that comes with contributing to church or community events tend to be more important than money per se.

In the past, these "value sets" have allowed islanders to live in harmony and to survive. But, concludes Hezel, they do not lead to economic development in today's environment. Strategies other than simply pouring more money into the islands, into underdeveloped countries, must be found if these areas are to become effective participants in today's transnational economies. The full text can be found at <[www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org)>.