

6/3/11

In addition to hearings on proposed changes to the zoning law, public hearings are also scheduled this coming week on Representative Stanley T. Torres' casino gambling bill, House Local Bill 17-44, as follows: Monday, 6/6, at the Tanapag Elementary School; Tuesday, 6/8, at the Dandan school; Friday, 6/10, at Kagman Elementary; and Monday, 6/13, at the Multi-purpose Center in Susupe. All hearings are scheduled for 6:00 p.m.

The bill, as it appears on the legislative web site, < www.cnmileg.gov.mp > provides that all "revenue" generated from operation of the casino - rather than net earnings - would go to the Commonwealth Treasury for general appropriation by the 3rd Senatorial District. There doesn't seem to be any provision for casino owners/developers to take any of those earnings as a profit - not very attractive to possible investors.

Among the bill's other provisions: applicants would not be eligible for a Qualifying Certificate, all casino employees would be paid the minimum federal wage, casino commission members would receive a \$50,000 per year salary, each license would require "connection with a new investment of not less than \$100 million dollars" or connection with an existing hotel establishment of 200 rooms or more. The bill also states that the Commission "may" impose a \$200,000 license application fee and would give casino license fee applicants five years to complete development and construction of their casino.

There is, of course, the question of whether the bill is constitutional. The CNMI Constitution provides that gambling is prohibited in the CNMI "except as provided by Commonwealth law or through initiative in the Commonwealth or in any senatorial district." Torres argues that a local law is a "Commonwealth law" and that therefore his bill is constitutional, but others disagree. Nonetheless, it behooves those who oppose gambling on Saipan to come out, once again, and speak up against this social disease.

The proposal will not go out for a decision by voters, but will be decided by the members of the Saipan local delegation. What will count, this time, is the testimony that will given at the public hearings. Therefore, it is crucial that those opposed appear and testify.

It is also important that people attend and speak up at the hearings on the proposed changes to Saipan's zoning law, also scheduled for this week. (See last week's column for a fuller discussion of the proposed amendments.) The *Saipan Tribune* printed a full-page map in its 6/1 issue delineating the changes that House Local Bill 17-26 (amendments to the zoning law) would bring, together with a full-page layout of the schedule of hearings on the bill. It's too bad that neither have appeared in the *Marianas Variety*.

Hearings are scheduled at the Garapan Elementary School on June 6, at the Gregorio T. Camacho Elementary School on June 7th, at the Kagman Community Center on June 8th, at the Zoning Office in Dandan on June 9th, at the San Vicente School on June 10th, at the Dandan Elementary School on June 13th, at the Koblerville Youth Center on June 14th, and at the Zoning Office on June 28th. All are scheduled to begin at 6:00 p.m.

Yet another hearing has been added to the schedule - according to a notice in yesterday's *Trib*, there will be a separate hearing, at 6:00 p.m. on June 30th at the Zoning Board office, on the amendment that would classify properties within 600 feet of the center line of major paved roads

as "Mixed Commercial." Originally, this was supposed to be addressed at each of the already-scheduled hearings. The list of the 21 roads affected can be found in the 6/2 issue of the *Tribune*. The amendments propose significant changes that will directly affect what the villages and the island itself will look like from now on. Once again, the changes will not be on any ballot - the decision on whether to adopt them is up to the local legislative delegation - the Saipan members of the House and Senate. They need to hear from the public on whether these changes are acceptable, and if so, which ones.

As former Zoning Board Chairperson of the Zoning Board Herminia Matsumoto Fusco wrote in today's *Saipan Tribune*, "Essentially, it [SLB17-26] will kill zoning in everything but name.....this bill will drastically impact zoning and will change the landscape of the whole island of Saipan. We will be basically back to the anything-goes mentality of the past."

The complaint is wide-spread that it is mostly elected officials who are hurting our islands. Here's an opportunity for voters to speak up, to exert their influence, to let their legislators know how they feel, what they believe in, what they want to see for their island. With so much at stake, let's hope voters don't miss out on the chance to be heard.

The proposal recently announced by the administration to remove the Historic Preservation Office, the Arts Council and the Language Policy Commission from the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs and place them under the Office of Indigenous Affairs makes no sense whatsoever. To begin with, both the Historic Preservation Office and the Arts Council deal with more than just indigenous subjects. Would putting HPO under the Indigenous Affairs Office cut out all its work with WW II, for example? And what about its federal funding for that era?

The Arts Council as well has, up until now, supported art activities from other than indigenous people, groups, entities. Will all that cease with this move?

And where will the Indigenous Affairs Office get the staff, space, equipment, funding, to deal with three new responsibilities?

Supposedly, the move is an outcome of an audit conducted by Virginia-based Management Analysis Inc. last year. One wonders what the justification may have been. On paper, the CNMI constitutional list of responsibilities of the IAO might justify such a move - at least in part. But until now it hasn't operated that way, and it lacks the "infrastructure" to do so. Yet it's all supposed to happen by October 1 of this year.

Short takes:

- Also on the schedule for this coming week: the Flame Tree Arts Festival at American Memorial Park. It begins with evening hours Thursday, 6/9, and Friday, 6/10, from 6:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m., Saturday, 6/11, from 11:00a.m., until 10:00 p.m., with official opening ceremonies at 11:00 a.m., and Sunday, 6/12, from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

- For those who might be wondering why the Zoning Board is conducting hearings on a proposed local law, turns out the legislature asked the Board to hold the hearings, and the Board willingly complied. Sure hope the Board gets compensation of some sort for all the extra time, effort and expense involved!

- The poll being taken by the *Saipan Tribune* this week, "Do you agree with Interior's statement that power poles will have no adverse affect on Marpi?" misses the point entirely. Of course farmers and present and future Marpi residents want power. The real question is whether that power must come from CUC - which gets more expensive every day - or whether there are better alternatives, like wind and solar.

- A survey is underway in the CNMI to determine people's interest in broadband services. ("Broadband" has been used interchangeably with the word "Internet," though there are technical differences.) The survey is part of a larger project of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to "craft a digital inclusion blueprint for the CNMI based on community input and global best practices" according to Daniel Calarco, Director of International Programs for One Economy Corp, the company conducting the survey. Eventually, apparently, it is NTIA's intent to publish a national broadband map. The first "town hall" was held in San Roque recently. More are scheduled to be held throughout the island in coming months.

- The unexplained disappearance of Faloma and Maleina Luhk a week ago Wednesday is deeply disturbing. It seems almost inconceivable, in fact. In all likelihood, the outcome will be just as disturbing. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family. At least it's reassuring to know that there seems to be no shortage of professional help.