

3/16/12

What a blow! Whether by accident or design, the CNMI appeared to have finally gotten its act together, and actually been well-prepared to appropriately welcome the Queen Mary 2 and its passengers yesterday- only to have Mother Nature spoil it all.

Cooks chopped and mixed and baked and fried, store clerks showed up for work at 5:00 a.m., performers practiced, tents were put up and staffed, busses, vans and drivers lined up, Department of Public Safety and Boating Safety on hand, the Emergency Management Office and Port authorities on alert, endless meetings held and logistics ironed out - the entire community eager for a view of the vessel, many equally eager to offer individual escort to passengers - and then the wind began to blow, and it was all called off.

There'd initially been mention of having the QM2 pull up to the dock, raising all sorts of security, access and logistics concerns of its own. Seemingly at the last minute it was revealed that passengers would instead be brought to Smiling Cove - a much simpler and more practical plan. The ship would anchor off-shore, and its shuttles would bring passengers to shore, where they'd be within walking distance of Garapan's major tourist shops. One wonders why this had not been the announced plan from the very beginning.

There's now talk that the QM2 could and should have pulled up to the dock, but Port Manager Mary Ann Lizama explains that the turning basin is not deep enough to accommodate the QM2, leaving moot the question of whether there were enough tugs available to bring her in, as had been rumored.

But nothing could be done about the wind and the consequent rough water. For the sake of the safety of his passengers, the captain decided that it was not safe to launch the shuttles, and that was that. As the poet Robert Burns wrote, "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men/ Gang aft a-gley, [often go awry]/ An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,/ For promised joy."

Let's hope the grief and pain were not all that severe! The entire CNMI owes all those who were out there at 5:00 a.m, ready, willing and able to serve the QM2's passengers and crew, appreciation, admiration, and a heartfelt thank-you!

Is all that effort - the inconvenience, the cost of overtime, the other expenses that are inevitably involved - worth it for a tourist stay of only 8-10 hours on island? Those experienced in such matters say "yes, definitely." There is not only the actual cash from sales that enters the economy, but also the ripple effect of that cash, as well as the positive publicity that is earned by the tourists'/passengers' - and crew's - positive experiences.

So as not to lose out entirely, it would be useful if all the parties involved met once more to conduct a "postmortem" - to discuss and compile a list of what went well, and what did not; what caused problems and how they were fixed, what seemed extraneous, and what was missing. After all, the opportunity to greet cruise ships will come again - though perhaps not on the scale of the QM2 - and there's no reason not to offer them a similar welcome. It would be helpful, therefore, if the plans and decisions put together for the QM2 were recorded for use the next time.

Among the refinements that might be made: providing residents interested in interacting with tourists - taking them to lunch, taking them sight-seeing, just ferrying them from Smiling Cove to Garapan or Susupe - with some sort of tag that would identify them to the passengers as

having been "vetted" and safe. With a year to prepare - as apparently there is for such cruise ship visits - it should not be difficult to set up a system whereby residents who had a valid driver's license and car insurance and had no criminal record could obtain a decal or some other means of identification that tourists could recognize before getting into a stranger's car. Safety, after all, is no small concern for either the tourists themselves, or for the CNMI.

More attention might also be given to just what goods should be offered to tourists by those vendors allowed in the tourist disembarkation areas. It's bad enough that made-in-China "souvenirs" are sold in all the stores, but souvenirs sold in official welcoming venues should be genuine, made in the CNMI. It's ok if they are pandanus weavings, ribbon leis, shell jewelry, or coconut shell creations - so long as they are made in the CNMI.

Finding answers to the question, "Why did the QM2 come to Saipan rather than Guam?" might also be worth discussing at such a postmortem. Could it be because of Saipan's rural nature, its open spaces, its greenery, its accessible beaches, its sparkling lagoon, the birds visible nearly everywhere? The answer has obvious implications for land use, economic development, zoning - in other words, to maintain an edge over Guam, those things that attract such cruise ships should be protected, preserved, nurtured.

Lastly, though it seems an island characteristic to wait 'til the last minute to pull events of this nature together, with the 6-to 12-month notice that is usually available for cruise ship itineraries, it might be easier on all concerned if planning wasn't put off until the last two weeks, as seemed the case here. And if the general public were allowed into the loop as well.....

Those who support casino gambling as the solution to the CNMI's financial crisis must know something the rest of us don't. They keep trying to persuade everyone to join them in voting for the establishment of one or more casinos on Saipan, certain, in their own minds, apparently, that that would solve the CNMI's dilemma: not having enough income to pay all its bills, to make its payroll.

But, as Judge Govendo is reported as having noted during the court forum this past week, they expect everyone to accept that on blind faith. The casino supporters have not told anyone just what they have in mind, what it is that makes them so sure that casinos are the answer. Has an investor been identified? More than one? How real is s/he? Just how much of an investment is s/he willing to make? Would there be one casino? more? how many? Where would it/they be? How long would it take to build it, or convert whatever space they have in mind, into an operating casino? Where would the money come from? What permits would they need? How long would it take to get them approved? Where would the staff come from? How long would it take to train them? What about the equipment for the casino(s)?

Where would the customers come from? How would they get to Saipan in sufficient numbers to make a casino a paying proposition? What could Saipan's casino(s) offer to persuade gamblers to come here rather than go to Macao, or Reno, or Hong Kong?

With something as controversial as casinos at stake, it will take more than blind faith to persuade very many people to change their mind. So far, thank goodness, bribery and pay-outs have not been all that successful.....

There is already debate on whether the CNMI should have an elected or an appointed attorney general, and now that a legislative initiative amending the Constitution to provide for an elected attorney general has passed both houses and will be on the ballot in November, there is bound to be a lot more. The strongest argument for an elected AG is the present situation, with the present attorney general appearing to be a mere appendage to the office of the governor rather than an independent entity.

Will that make the position "political"? In the sense that the position depends on votes being cast, yes, it does. But it doesn't have to be partisan. One could, for example, place the same limits on candidates for attorney general that are placed on judges eligible for retention: campaigning would not be allowed, nor would party politics. There would appear to be no reason, though, why there could not be debates between candidates on their views of such things as how crime and criminals should be dealt with in the CNMI.

Unfortunately, the proposed legislative initiative has a major flaw: it sets the salary for the position of elected attorney general at a fixed dollar amount. That means the salary cannot be changed without a constitutional amendment. There is no provision for change by any other means. In contrast, salary levels for other positions identified in the CNMI Constitution can be altered by a special commission, by law, or by comparison to similar positions. One wonders why the same was not done in this instance.