

6/22/12

Having been strangely silent these last several weeks, leaving both retirees and active members upset, disturbed and worried, the Retirement Fund finally issued a press release yesterday, putting at least some concerns to rest. The Fund has asked the Bankruptcy Court for authorization to continue paying the full amount of pensions, and its share of health and life insurance premiums - and noted that since no objection has been filed, the request is expected to be granted. So it looks like pension checks will not be cut - at least in the near future.

The press release also addressed the controversial \$1.5 million bill that had been submitted for attorney fees, explaining that the \$1.5 million covered the billing of four attorneys - Brown Rudnick and Heussman, representing the Fund, and Gelber and Thompson, representing the creditor committee - not just one. In fact, it is unlikely that Heussman, who was perceived as being owed the entire amount, will even expend the retainer fee of \$20,000 he received.

Not revealed in the press release, but also generally held by Fund representatives, is the general agreement that the Fund will not file an appeal of the dismissal of the bankruptcy petition because it would be too costly, consuming dollars needed elsewhere.

The Fund has behaved as though under siege - retreating into the corner rather than speaking out. One can hardly blame management, staff or Board members - little they have said appears to have been understood or comprehended by the community, the administration or the legislature, and nothing they've suggested or recommended has been acted upon by anyone.

There is yet more misunderstanding out there, more fuzzy information. For example, there is no good reason for not-yet-retired employees to withdraw their contributions from the Fund - those who are members of the Defined Contribution plan will not lose anything even if the Retirement Fund collapses. But they will lose considerable if they do withdraw their monies - they will have lost the amount - though small - that the government has paid into their plans, and they won't have a pension to fall back on when they retire.

Insofar as Social Security is concerned, there are apparently two aspects: active government employees would be able to join Social Security if an arrangement were agreed to between Social Security and the government of the CNMI. But the "buy-back" or "buy-in" - acquiring five years of credit towards the total of ten years needed in order to be eligible for retirement - would require a change in federal law, since present law does not include the CNMI as eligible for the buy-back provision.

There are many complaints about the several attorneys involved with the Retirement Fund, and suggestions that the number be reduced. Yet as one retiree has said, one doesn't ask a pediatrician to perform eye surgery, and by the same token, one can't expect a tax attorney to litigate bankruptcy matters. Specialties require skills, and skills cost money. Though the \$1.5 million in attorney fees may seem high, compared to the \$300 million that is at stake in the Fund suit against the government, it is a comparatively small amount.

There is also considerable unhappiness and frustration among retirees that there is no vehicle that allows the voice of the retirees to be heard with any degree of accuracy. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth Retirees Association has not been at all effective in meeting the needs of large numbers of retirees. No attempt is being made to help retirees understand the issues, no way has been established to reach out to all the retirees - be they on or off-island - and determine where

they stand on issues, and no mechanism exists for relaying any position that might be reached to the powers that be.

It has been suggested that an attorney be hired to represent the interests of the retirees, and while some feel this may be the only way to be heard, others object to the costs it will entail.

In the meantime, the clock keeps ticking and RF funds keep eroding, with no real solution in sight.

Personal copies of former CNMI Museum curators Robert and Gigi York's long-awaited book on slingstones have finally made it to the CNMI. (The book has been available both via amazon.com and from its publisher Kent State University Press for several months.) The full title, *Slings and Slingstones: the Forgotten Weapons of Oceania and the Americas* says it all: in what is much more than a scientific report of findings, the Yorks contend that historians and archaeologists alike have ignored and overlooked plentiful evidence that slingstones played a significant role in the lives of peoples throughout the world.

The book is very readable, with many illustrations, maps, charts and diagrams to support their thesis. It is also full of challenges, citing case after case where failure to identify slingstones, to recognize them as ammunition, to consider them artifacts, "is a serious impediment to gaining an accurate picture about the behavior of ancient peoples ... especially with regard to warfare, hunting practices, and yes, transpacific contacts." "It is simply high time to look at all those stone balls with fresh eyes and new ideas," they write.

They also examine the question of whether slingstones spread throughout the world by diffusion, or by independent invention. Though the Yorks suggest that use of slingstones may have first occurred in areas of volcanic activity that produced volcanic spheroids and elliptical bombs - and that it may have occurred in various locations quite independently - "this hardly rules out diffusion as a mechanism that was responsible for the spread of these forms from different centers."

They conclude, "There remain so many avenues to explore, questions to ask, and answers to discover."

It bears noting that Robert and Gigi's interest in slingstones began during their work at the CNMI Museum - where they came upon the slingstones - and their realization that little research had been done on their history and use.

Short takes:

- For those who missed sessions, or just want to refresh their memories thereof, copies of the papers presented at last week's First Marianas History Conference will be available in e-book form and on the guampedia web site once authors have submitted their papers in final form.

Estimated availability: in about two months.

- The coconut wireless suggests that the reason CIP and grant funds are being held, rather than spent on their designated projects, is so that they may be re-programmed for other purposes.

Unfortunately, an unintended consequence is the likelihood that those monies will be reduced the next time around because they were not used as specified.

- Today's *Saipan Tribune* reports that a bill is being drafted by Representative Joseph Palacios that would remove the 3% increase in pensions for all elected officials and cap the amount of pension received by surviving spouses. It wouldn't generate a lot of revenue, but it would at least cut the amount being lost by the Fund each month. It certainly is one of the more reasonable bills that has been proposed, but will it get the support it needs to pass - and how long will that take?

Upcoming events:

- Saturday, 6/23 - Special pre-hearing community outreach for Koblerville at Southern High School, 4:00-6:00 p.m.; Sunday, 6/24 from 4:00-6:00 p.m. for Dandan at Dandan Elementary School, on the USAF Draft Environmental Impact Statement for "proposed divert activities and exercises, Guam and the CNMI" at the Saipan International Airport and Tinian International Airport due to the potential impact on those communities by possible increase in aircraft-related noise.

- Monday, 6/25, 5:00-7:00 p.m. - USAF public hearing on at the Multi-purpose Center in Susupe on the USAF Draft Environmental Impact Statement for "proposed divert activities and exercises, Guam and the CNMI." Deadline for comments is July 23, 2012. The full report can be found at < <http://www.pacafdivertmarianaseis.com/> >.

- Every first Saturday for the rest of the year, from 8:00 a.m. - noon: Friends of the Library book sale at the JoeTen-Kiyu Public Library in Susupe.

- June 22-August 17 - Free family-friendly films twice a day every Friday at 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. in the Visitor Center auditorium at American Memorial Park (except first Fridays of the month). June 22: *Bear*, a 2003 Disney animated classic; June 29: *How to Train Your Dragon*, a 2010 Dreamworks production.

- Friday, June 22, Saturday, June 23, 7:00 p.m. - Showing of the film *Last Stand for Sharks*, Friday at Hopwood Jr. High School, Saturday at the American Memorial Park amphitheater, admission free.