

8/3/12

It's too bad members of the CNMI House of Representatives can't leave well enough alone. Instead of keeping it simple and focusing on number of members - a mandate brought about by the last census - House members are complicating the issue by adding other changes to a legislative initiative affecting both the House and Senate that faces an August 8 deadline if it is to get on this November's ballot.

The House initiative proposes a four-year term for members of the House. That anyone could seriously consider such an extension after having to put up with the present "do-nothing" legislature for an extra year, is beyond belief. Who would want to get stuck for TWO extra years, should such an unproductive group again get into office?

The House initiative also proposes island-wide elections for the House, rather than having candidates run at the precinct level. In the same way that the Senate accommodates the population differences within the CNMI, so the House should accommodate the population differences within Saipan. As has been pointed out, the smaller villages would suffer if elections were island-wide. Even the U.S. House of Representatives accommodates the differences in population of member states.

Yet another change is the proposal to reduce the Senate from nine to six members. It sure would make for heightened competition! The only problem is that it would leave the Senate with an even number of members, but no provision has been written into the Constitution as to how ties would be broken. The U.S. Constitution provides the vice-president with the power to break ties in the U.S. Senate, should they occur. Logically, that would mean the lieutenant governor would have that power. But so far as can be determined, there is no provision for that authority within CNMI law.

While David M. Sablan's suggestion (see his letters to the editor in today's issue of both the *Saipan Tribune* and the *Marianas Variety*) that the Senate consist of only one member from each island is indeed noble, and would save money, it's hard to imagine such a small group working together peaceably for any length of time.

Though re-apportionment is required by law, and the reduction proposed in the current House legislation from 20 to 11 is reasonable, what with all the other changes being proposed in the same initiative, it hardly seems likely that - provided it gets on the ballot to begin with - it will get enough votes to pass. A legislative initiative requires a three-quarter vote of members present in each house to be eligible for the ballot. Once on the ballot it requires a majority of votes cast to pass.

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Representative Felicidad Ogomoro's new ploy to force casino gambling down the throats of the people of the CNMI is ingenious, but not nearly as harmless as it might appear. A closer look reveals that her House Bill 17-297, which adds a short paragraph to existing law, would allow not-for-profit organizations to conduct "supervised gambling" as a means of raising funds for worthy causes. It does not define "gambling." It does not spell out the allowable duration of such gambling events (one day, one week, one month? or more?). It leaves authorization for conduct of the gambling up to the Registrar for Corporations. It contradicts the preceding paragraph, which says gambling is allowed "one occasion per calendar quarter," whereas H.B. 17-297 says it shall be permitted "on an annual basis."

Nor does it take into account the effect on the extremely successful Rotary Club's annual Las Vegas night - which until now has been the only such gambling event conducted on island.- nor on its beneficiaries. With more gambling opportunities available, the size of the piece of the pie each receives is bound to shrink accordingly. With more gambling opportunities available, the social ills, on the other hand, will increase accordingly.

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Though this bill has not yet had a public hearing, it seems nonetheless relevant to raise the question as to why public hearings are so often poorly attended. Granted, on occasion large numbers of people do attend, but generally speaking, that is not the case. The hearings are announced in the local papers, but for whatever reason, the on-line editions of the papers do not include the hearing announcements. Which raises the question: what extent of the readership now gets its news from the on-line version, rather than hard copy? Could this be a reason for the meager attendance? that people simply don't know the hearings are being held?

Quite coincidentally, the *Saipan Tribune's* poll this week asks readers to identify their primary source of local news: tv, internet or newspapers. Oddly enough, radio is not offered as a choice. As of this writing, the poll indicates that for most readers, it is the internet - which could be interpreted as bearing out that readers simply do not learn about the hearings. In which case, it might behoove the newspapers to include hearing notices in their on-line editions, and those publishing hearing notices to be sure that their notices are available on-line.

Interestingly, television gets a very poor rating - though that could be because television watchers don't read the on-line *Trib*.....

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Should the Consolidated Natural Resources Act of 2008-based CW transitional worker program be allowed to expire in 2014, as the law now calls for? In the olden days there was a saying that "if wishes were horses, beggars would ride," meaning that wishes, by themselves, weren't very helpful, that it would take more than making a wish to get what one wanted. One could, for example, wish that by then the U.S. Congress would see fit to provide improved status to the CNMI's foreign workers, and make all the rigamarole about CW status, and visas and parole go away. But given the larger picture of the immigration issue on the U.S. mainland, that's not very likely to happen.

Contrary to the belief of at least one member of the House of Representatives, who was quoted at length in the 7/31 issue of the *Variety* as saying plenty of time remains to train local workers to fill all foreign worker positions, this is simply not so. Many of the foreign workers in the CNMI are highly skilled technicians, who have undergone years of education and training to reach their present positions. A mere two years is simply not long enough to provide equivalent education and training to local workers. Nor are there enough "warm bodies" on island ready, willing and able to fill all the jobs currently held by foreign workers.

Reality, unfortunately, offers no good alternative other than renewal. That is not to say one should stop campaigning for change, for improved status for contract workers, but in the face of the present climate in Washington, D.C., around the nation, and locally, that's a long shot that one cannot afford to rely on.

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Short takes:

- Does anyone share the nightmare image that the House, the Senate, the Administration, even the Commonwealth Retiree Association, have all deliberately abandoned ship, allowing the Retirement Fund to flounder without a captain, without direction, and with no relief in sight? The main culprit appears to be the governor, who won't appoint members to the Board of Trustees so that it may function, though the Senate is almost as guilty for failing to have approved the re-appointment of former chairman Sixto Igisomar. Inertia - the tendency of a body in motion to continue in motion - may keep the Fund afloat for a short time, but with so much at stake, continuing leaderlessness is bound to lead to catastrophe. The inaction has already caused the Fund to lose its most valuable people asset; the contract for hard-working, highly competent, wholly capable Fund Administrator Richard Villagomez was allowed to expire on July 31. One dreads to think of what is yet to come.

\* - The CNMI has apparently gone on record as favoring Tinian over Saipan as the site for possible airport improvements and additions associated with supporting U.S. Air Force "divert" activities in cases of emergency. It is true that either locale will bring improvement to the CNMI economy, but one wonders whether anyone in the CNMI bothered to figure out which would have the greater impact on the overall economy before making the decision.