

On My Mind

1/26/01

It is re-assuring to discover that there are others out there who occasionally share a viewpoint of mine, and feel strongly enough about it to go so far as to write a letter to the editor on the matter.

A Juan M. Sablan of San Vicente did so today, writing a long - and eloquent - letter to the <I>Variety</I> urging the Governor to waive the CRMO requirements that the Tinian Dynasty Hotel shut down its generators and hook up to the CUC power plant.

When the Tinian Dynasty Hotel was first proposed - and indeed, for several years after it was built - the CUC power plant on Tinian was too small to generate the power that the hotel required. So it built its own generator plant, at considerable additional expense. In an effort to support local infrastructure, a condition was added to the hotel's CRMO permit that once CUC power became available on Tinian, the hotel would hook up to island power. That did not seem an unreasonable restriction - at the time.

Now that CUC has finally upgraded its Tinian power plant, CUC is demanding that CRMO enforce that permit condition. But circumstances have changed since the signing of that permit. The hotel has been faced with one hurdle after another in its efforts to stay solvent. The extension of the landing strips on Tinian - promised to the hotel from the very beginning - to accommodate larger planes on direct flights from Asia as well as connecting flights from Guam and Saipan, has not yet taken place. As a result, the number of tourists needed to sustain the operation of hotel and casino has not materialized. In addition, the economy, instead of strengthening and growing, has weakened and slowed, again cutting into the number of guests at the hotel, the number of people frequenting its casino. And the Ports Authority has not helped, demanding that residents taking day trips to Tinian on the ferry shell out an additional \$10.00 to park their car at the dock.

Yet despite these adversities, the hotel and casino have continued to operate, and continue to constitute a major tourist attraction, a major boost to the economy of the CNMI. As Sablan points out, it makes no sense to demand that the Tinian Dynasty risk survival and go deeper into debt. The CNMI should waive - at least temporarily - the requirement that the Dynasty hook up to CUC.

True, that means that CUC will not be able to recoup its investment in the larger Tinian plant quite as quickly as planned. But with the additional casinos projected for Tinian, this should not be a problem for long.

I'm not a supporter of gambling, per se. I've never won a thing from even the many island raffles. If I'm lucky - and careful - I can make \$5.00 last about an hour at the Dynasty poker machines. But I can't help rooting for the hotel and casino. I just love the incongruity between the arid Tinian flatlands and this ornate marble palace with all its gorgeous chandeliers. It is always clean, polished, and beautifully decorated for whatever the season (for the Chinese New Year it had a really lovely cherry tree in the middle of the lobby, and great big red "lanterns" hung from the ceiling, as well as other decorations - also in red - in the lobby and throughout the

halls).

And I love to watch the dealers in the casino - their stylized hand movements, how fast they are at doing the math for the card games and counting up the chips. Watching the watchers - the staff who keep an eye on the dealers and on the players, who seem to be constantly counting and recording the chips - is equally fascinating. I suppose it could all be staged, but at least it gives the appearance that everything is legitimate and above-board - that cheating is not possible.

It also has a beautiful, large pool. And the casino restaurant serves good food (I can't afford the food in the other restaurants).

In other words, it has a lot to offer - even to a non-gambler like me. So why isn't the Tinian Dynasty Hotel and Casino being promoted by the visitor's authority? Why isn't CRMO working with the hotel and CUC to find a mutually acceptable solution? Why aren't the legislators - especially Tinian's- and the Chamber of Commerce helping to protect and promote this major tourism draw? Could it be that Saipan's tourism industry fears the competition?

Perhaps even more telling is the question: Can an equitable solution be found, if the forum for discussion is an enforcement hearing over which CRMO presides?

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Another forum, that seems to be producing positive results, is the Youth Congress. Its proposal that a center for trade skills development be established is commendable. Even more so, is the recognition by the members of the Youth Congress that those trade skills also constitute "lifetime skills" - skills that stand to benefit everyone, whether one is a high school dropout, or a college graduate.

We all need to know how to use a monkey wrench on a loose connection, how to rewire electric plugs, when to use what kind of nail or screw in simple home repair work. So-called trade skill education should be available to every junior and high school student as a part of the basic curriculum. It is encouraging that members of the Youth Congress recognize this, and are working to make it a reality.

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The subject keeps cropping up, like an unsinkable balloon: evacuate the residents of Tanapag. But like a balloon, it is full of [hot] air, and about as aimless. The excavation of high-risk-level PCB-contaminated soil in Tanapag is nearing completion. It is expected that in another month, all known high-risk-level PCB-contaminated soil in the village will have been removed to the "cells" constructed by the contractor, ECC, at the ECC work site.

All of the areas known to date to be PCB-contaminated have been identified, and marked. At this time, none of the known sites are considered to be a threat to village residents or residences. There is, at the moment, no immediate threat of acute, direct, exposure - the criteria used to

determine grounds for re-location - to any village resident. There is, thus, no need, no justification whatsoever, for relocation of village residents.

It is interesting that 21 Capitol Hill houses are unoccupied. And it is true that they'd make lovely homes if they were in good repair. But their existence is irrelevant to the issue. No family in Tanapag is in need of even temporary re-location at this point in the process.

The balloon should be popped, and discarded, once and for all.