

On My Mind
10/23/09

Uppermost on my mind this week is the upcoming election, especially the valiant campaign being waged by Representative Tina Sablan for a seat in the Senate. She is competing as an independent candidate against two Covenant (both women), two Republican, two other independent, and one Democratic party candidates, for one of two seats open this year.

As was true of her campaign for a seat in the House two years ago, Tina is not following the traditional pattern. There are no bumper stickers, no road-side signs, no radio or newspaper or tv ads, no fund raisers, no offers of jobs for votes, no glad-handing at every conceivable social function. Instead, Tina is hosting question and answer sessions at various locations around the island, going house-to-house, responding to phone calls, e-mails - all the while continuing to provide information to the community of up-coming meetings, of actions taken by the House, continuing to provide access to essential documents through her e-mails and web site, continuing to diligently attend to the business of the House.

Tina has been a shining example of what a good legislator can and should do, trying to keep the legislative process open and transparent; insisting that all the rules for processing proposed legislation - from the conduct of hearings and the preparation of reports by the committees to which bills were assigned to discussion of those reports prior to voting on the bills in question - be followed; focussing on priority issues.

In the decided minority, she has not always been successful, but she has continued to stick to her principles; she has not given in to pressure. Moreover, she has been very effective in keeping the community fully informed about the issues before the House, the schedule for dealing with them, and the documents related to them; and she does it all with integrity, grace and good-will - openly, honestly, transparently.

She will again have a struggle in the Senate. But she has the strength, the will, the conviction to continue to promote and practice good governance, and who can say that the Senate is not just as badly in need of that as is/was the House?

They say the way to make one's vote most effective is to vote for only Tina in the Senate race. I don't understand why that works, but on the assumption that it does, I would urge everyone to do so.

Zaldy Dandan's description of CNMI politicians (see his "Variations" in last Friday's issue of the *Marianas Variety*) and what they need to do to get re-elected was interesting, I suppose, but somewhat frightening as well. Dandan, editor of the *Variety*, wrote, in part, that "The really good politician not only knows most of his constituents by name, he is also aware of the christenings, birthdays, weddings, funeral, fiestas and fundraisers in his precinct. He makes sure he attends these events and he buys or helps sell fundraising tickets. Moreover, he acts as his constituents' liaison to CUC, DPW or

whatever government agency is responsible for whatever the problem is in a particular area."

Dandan does not mention the fact that the primary purpose of members of the legislature, however, is not to play politician and schmooze his/her constituents. Their primary purpose is to perform as legislators, and work with the executive branch, the judicial branch and fellow legislators to see that the overall government functions smoothly, properly, with accountability, that it meets the needs not only of their own constituents, but of everyone in the CNMI.

He does acknowledge that "It is not enough to be righteous and 'correct' about the issues," but then says that "If you're in office but still unable to get your colleagues to support the reforms you believe are crucial for the community, then I suggest you quit politics and join a debating club. Or write newspaper editorials." What a negative, bitter, depressing thing to say!

Fortunately for the CNMI, there are people like Tina Sablan - and help and support from other like-minded individuals - who are willing and able to take on the challenge.

In addition to candidates for elected office, four other items will be on the ballot on November 7: two House legislative initiatives and one Senate legislative initiative to amend portions of the CNMI Constitution, and a popular initiative to amend a portion of the CNMI Code.

House Legislative Initiative 15-3 would amend Article XV, Section 1(c) re the composition of the Board to require the student representative be a high school student and the public school representative to be a teacher. This initiative would also amend Section 1(e) regarding the 15% of the general resources the Constitution guarantees to the Public School System. Information available as of this writing does not specify where the initiative differs from what is already in the Constitution.

House Legislative Initiative 16-11 would amend Article III, Section 9 (a) to prohibit withdrawal of funds from the General Fund except by legislative appropriation.

Senate Legislative Initiative 16-11 would amend Article VIII, Section 1 to require that regular general elections be held only on even-numbered years, in order to coincide with Federal elections, now that the CNMI has a (non-voting) delegate in the U.S. Congress. The controversial part of this initiative is that as written, it would give all those who win election this year an extra year in office. It could have been written to give them all one year LESS in office. A shorter "transition" term instead of a longer one would avoid the risk of being stuck with a truly unpopular governor - or member(s) of the legislature - for a full extra year.

The un-numbered Popular Initiative would change the law (n.b., NOT the Constitution) to require that the provisions of the "Open Government Act of 2007" apply equally to the Legislature.

There's not much time left to do the required public education necessary if people

are going to be expected to cast an intelligent vote on these four items. So far, not even the full text of the actual amendments has been available, nor has any balanced discussion of the pros and cons of the proposed amendments.

Perhaps they should all be postponed until the next election - with the exception of the popular initiative, which has gotten enough publicity and discussion to make it obvious that it is a "no-brainer" as they say - of course the legislature should be subject to the same openness as the rest of government!

Is it CNMI law that requires bids to be awarded to the lowest bidder? The false economy of doing so was revealed once again, earlier this year, when something called "Project Management Operations LLC" was chosen to prepare a report defining opportunities for the CNMI in the Guam military build-up - apparently solely because it came up with the lowest price for doing the work.

A draft of the company's 77-page report, made available for comment this past week, was not only shamefully illiterate but also largely boiler-plate and cut-and-paste from other sources, nor was it particularly useful or helpful in addressing its subject. Yet it is to be paid \$160,000 for its effort. Admittedly, this is not a lot of money per se, but in this economy, it is money that could much better have been spent elsewhere.

Yes, price should be a factor in deciding bid awards. But it should never be allowed to become the deciding factor. After all, everyone knows one gets what one pays for (with some exceptions). Buy cheap, and get something cheap. Pay more, and one gets a better product. As has been mentioned here before, you wouldn't want to be launched into space (or go out to sea) on a craft built by the lowest bidder.

It's high time the CMNI stopped wasting its money and changed whatever law, rule or regulation it is that requires bids to be awarded to the lowest bidder regardless of any other qualifications.

Short takes:

I've not followed the "umbrella" permit issue closely enough to tell who is right or wrong, but there's an old saying that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably IS too good to be true. Then, too, remembering other actions and pronouncements, when it comes to trusting and believing Wendy Dromol or Deanne Siemer, I'm inclined to go with Wendy, every time. Hopefully, the forum scheduled at the American Memorial Park amphitheater from 9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m tomorrow will shed some light.

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Wonder why the candidates never use the back side of their bill-boards? There are two sides, and people pass them in both directions. Wouldn't it make sense to put whatever is on the front on the back as well? Such a waste of space!

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The CNMI Supreme Court has started writing its own press releases. We are glad

to see them. Legal issues can get pretty confusing, and so far, the Court releases have been most helpful, providing all the pertinent information in crystal clear language.