

Plebiscite's all about cold, hard federal cash

Do people everywhere vote with their pocket-book? Frankly, that doesn't sound very noble. There are many things more important than the money dollar as we move through life. There is love, wisdom, health, patriotism, loyalty and culture. Yet, you can't hide your head in a clump of coconuts either.



Joe
Murphy

The upcoming plebiscite on Guam, just three months away, is certainly going to be about money whether we want it to be or not. The presumption is that the United States has the money and we need it. The idea is that if we are close to the United States, as a brother, they will continue to dole it out to the people of Guam, as they have in the past.

First, there are increasing signs that the political-status election may be postponed simply because we're not ready. I don't like that. I want the election held to see where we stand, so we can move on from there.

The chances of the Chamorro-only election being held in July seems slim at this point for three reasons: One, we don't have the funds and the trained people at the election commission. Two, they haven't even started registering Chamorros yet, and surely there is going to be trouble doing this registration because the records are far from clear. Three, there is always the possibility of disgruntled non-Chamorro taxpayers filing a suit against the election commission, trying to invalidate any Chamorro-only election. Let's go back and look at this money issue. Shouldn't the

activists, those favoring independence, be advocating a moratorium on U.S. funding to Guam so as to not influence the election? They should be parading up and down Marine Drive with big signs reading: "No More Money!" "No More Money!" That would be the only fair way.

The activists are saying: "Oh, don't worry. We'll get the money from our other neighbors." Or, "Let's not fear this. We'll sign an agreement with the United States about the bases and we'll have plenty of money coming in." Maybe. Or perhaps the United States will shift its bases to the Northern Marianas or Palau where they have rights.

The real problem is when we go to the polls, the people will not have a very clear idea of what is going to be coming into Guam from the United States, or from Japan, or China, in the way of funding. So, I would assume that if we vote for independence, we're also voting for a lower standard of living.

I'm thinking of three ladies that my wife, the real-estate agent, took around a few weeks ago. The three were a mother and two daughters with children. They all wanted Section 8 housing. They all got apartments thanks to Uncle Sam. They weren't about to live together. You wonder just how those three will vote in any plebiscite. Will they demand independence and lose their apartments?

The census also seems to go against the grain of a Chamorro-only vote. Delegate Robert Underwood and a lot of others want everybody counted "to ensure that Guam gets its fair share of federal funding." Becky Lujan, a liaison officer for the census, writes that an "inaccurate count will hurt our island." How? Because we won't get our fair share of federal funding.

I'm not sure I totally buy the idea of our getting our fair share

of federal funds because Guam doesn't really pay federal taxes. We do pay, but it stays on Guam or is sent back to Guam.

I've been trying for years to determine how much federal money actually comes to the island. I have even talked to a member of Delegate Underwood's staff, trying to get this information. Apparently, it isn't available in any single form.

Becky Lujan, director of commerce, reported in a Pacific Daily News article that, in federal revenues shared with state and local governments, Guam received \$107 million in 1996 and \$134 million in fiscal 2000. I know it doesn't work this way, but assuming three GovGuam employees cost \$100,000, you get 30 employees for a million. That means the feds are paying for the equivalent of 4,020 GovGuam employees.

Lujan points out that "an inaccurate count will hurt our island for a full decade because population projections are used to compute allocations each year." She says that the largest recipient of federal dollars is the Department of Public Health, receiving \$50 million in 1996 and \$62 million in 2000. Federal grants to the Guam Housing and Urban Renewal Authority also depend on census data to determine the number of families eligible for public housing programs.

Other federal funds include grants for the University of Guam, for agriculture and for highway work. Other monies come in for water programs, saving our reefs, for the Navy payroll, for the Air Force and for keeping the airport and port up to snuff.

I would think Delegate Underwood would make an effort to seek out all the information on federal funding for Guam so the people here would be in a better position to vote with knowledge on their side.

Joe Murphy is a former editor for the Pacific Daily News and writes his Pipe Dreams column daily.

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