

2021 Department of Public Lands Scholarship Essay Contest

Essay Prompt- "What can the CNMI do to strike a sustainable balance between land preservation and land development?"

November 2021

Comprised of fourteen beautiful islands, standing at the northernmost side of the Mariana Archipelago, this is the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Although each island is modest in size, its beauty is incomparable to the crowded, bustling cities that most are familiar with. I've noticed that some of our islands here in the CNMI have been exponentially growing with industrial buildings and booming with everlasting construction, but at what point must we set constraints on these projects and focus on protecting our lands? Our goal is to formulate plans and establish reasonable goals that will preserve the beauty of our island while allowing us to develop as a society and increase economic growth.

Zoning

Zoning, what does it entail and what are the benefits to enforcing it? For starters, proper zoning can make certain that land is used properly, all while providing value to citizens with property ownership.

Things to consider while zoning. We need to consider population when making any further land development because the population itself has grown substantially over the years. Committees that oversee zoning want to obtain population data from the recent census to determine what percentage of the available land should be allowed for lease and land development. Another factor is, what is the land being used for? The different uses for land vary, it could be for industrial use, commercial, residential, agricultural, or historical use. Zoning protects against improper development in certain areas, it prevents people who lease land from using it to capitalize commercial use on a residential area; that is one example of how things can go sideways without zoning.

Permit Constraints

With this in mind, it will be a good idea to limit the issuances of permits for land development once a certain percentage of unpreserved land is being developed. If multiple or any land is in the process of being developed, we need to be able to track that through permit issuance. This leaves a gap where zoning and permits can correlate and complement each other when thinking about establishing zoning laws related to permits. This will sustain a balance between land preservation and land development, overall having a big impact on sustainability long-term.

Inflation is a separate issue that can be relative if we keep an open mind concerning land preservation. Due to costs rising, the costs for analysis for the land should follow inflation. The permits themselves should increase on an annual or semi-annual basis to track the development and labor costs associated with issuing permits.

Why does any of this matter and what does it do for us? We want to be able to track all development costs because we want a more competitive environment, not to deter land development, but to ensure that the intention of those is long-term investments. If there is a plan and a lease that considers long-term development, this will prevent any unfinished products and will increase the proper use of land or prevent development in a desultory fashion.

Requiring annual building inspections will play a big role in conquering this ideal. Hiring license inspectors to make sure buildings meet building codes that are equivalent to U.S. standards. Shifting back to costs, enforcing a certain deposit based on the value of the project rather than a set amount will also encourage proper land development without the risk of insufficient funds and planning. Of course, land development needs to stimulate the economy but still be affordable. However, this is why everything I mentioned matters, we want project proposals where land development is contingent on a deposit and project completion; naturally, we need this to be a non-refundable clause. If that is not possible and it is made refundable, that deposit should remain with DPL in a trust for a set period that considers the lease term.

All this supports the prevention of misconduct of land development and assists the ideal of land preservation in the long term. The matters mentioned above interact with each other and, with some consideration, can make a big impact on how land is developed on all of these wonderful islands of the CNMI and protect it in the long run. This is what I propose the CNMI do to strike a balance between land preservation and land development.