

SMALL ISLAND PLANNING - INTEGRATING CZM IN PARADISE

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While stunningly gorgeous, small islands present special challenges to coastal managers. The coastal zone officially covers small island uplands but US territorial coastal managers usually concentrate on the shoreline and nearshore. This paper suggests merging upland and coastal management for small islands, using Saipan as a case study.

Saipan is the capitol of the USA's Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). CNMI was created in 1978 after 31 years as a US trust territory. Saipan is small - 12.5 miles long and 5.5 miles wide - with approximately 60,000 people.

Although far from the US mainland, Saipan benefited greatly from NOAA support. A coastal management program was developed in the 1980s. Since then, the program regulated coastal development, monitored coral reefs, educated the public, and enhanced public access.

In 2004, NOAA staff said Saipan's was one of the best island coastal programs. While Saipan's shoreline was fringed with beautiful beaches, golf courses, high-rise hotels and dramatic views, the interior was different. The coastal program had focused mostly on shoreline issues. In 2004, the inland still had major roads without drainage or sidewalks, buildings without landscaping or parking, and neighborhoods troubled by auto repair and gambling shops.

In 2004, the CNMI Governor began looking for ways to make Saipan more attractive for tourism. Resurrecting a short-lived zoning law that had been suspended since 1994, the Governor appointed a new zoning board. In 2006, a new Governor strongly supported the new Board's efforts and the legislature provided seed money. The Board hired a Zoning Administrator and began planning in earnest. Early on, the Administrator wrote a grant for funding from the Office of Insular Affairs.

After a year and a half of public outreach, research, village meetings, media stories and a major planning conference, the Saipan Zoning Law of 2007 was enacted into law. The law has been strongly supported and praised by the Governor, legislators, citizens, and the business community. It provides a comprehensive development plan and standards to make neighborhoods livable, tourist areas pleasant, vehicle and pedestrian traffic safe, buildings and signs attractive, and adult businesses behave. Interestingly, the new zoning law was developed separately and with little involvement of the longstanding coastal program.

The Saipan Zoning Law's enormous success wasn't just good planning; the public had been ready for years. Coastal managers, including the author, had concentrated on

“coastal” problems and ignored issues that affected people’s lives just a few hundred feet inland. Saipan residents treasure the stunning lagoon, coral reefs, and other coastal resources. But people’s daily lives are most directly affected by the noisy neighborhood auto shops, the gambling and adult businesses, and common traffic hazards.

Integrating upland and coastal programs on small islands provides great public relations. It could also be more effective, save money, and maximize expertise and technology. Island managers and federal grantors should push to merge coastal management, upland planning, building codes, onsite sewage disposal, and related land use programs. The Saipan success begins to show the way.

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