

**Heavy Reliance on Tourism: Covid-19's Effect on CNMI's Tourism Economy (1st Person)**

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### **Heavy Reliance on Tourism: Covid-19's Effect on CNMI's Tourism Economy**

It was not so long ago, when I was chomping onto a cheeseburger at McDonald's with my boss and few of my colleagues. When someone randomly asked, "Do you know what CNMI stands for?" The person said, "it stands for cannot make it. CNMI cannot make it!" I almost choked on my cheeseburger from laughing, but then, I thought to myself. Can CNMI really make it? With the current situation, a lot of things are not looking so well and the main issue that I, myself, is directly dealing with is the COVID-19's effect on our tourism economy.

Hafa Adai, everyone! My name is Youki Kishimoto and my topic for the Community Issues Speech is Covid-19's effect on CNMI's tourism economy. I am a full time student at Northern Marianas College and also a staff member of the Saipan Mayor's Office. My job at the Mayor's Office is to coordinate student exchange programs and of course, due to this pandemic, all the exchange programs for this year were canceled along with other community events our office normally hosts.

In mid-March this year, which is normally the peak of visitor season with many tourists flying in, the novel coronavirus pandemic, now commonly referred to as COVID-19, was declared a public health emergency. We were ordered to comply with the guidelines that the governor's COVID-19 task force developed as containment measures to protect us, the public. As a result of this, strict border control was imposed, schools were cancelled, government offices were shut down, businesses were temporarily closed, and we were ordered to stay home. Among them all, tourism was one of the most directly affected sectors on our island.

How should we adjust the protection from COVID-19 in the form of social distancing and quarantine orders with the need to reopen our tourism economy? The CNMI's heavy reliance on the tourism market took a huge blow due to the ongoing outbreak and led to a crisis within our economy. Tourism has been a significant part of the island and the leading source of employment and job creation. While the majority of the people, including myself, believe that resuming international flights could risk the island's increase in the coronavirus cases, there are also many who believe the current state of our economy is at stake without the tourists coming in. According to the figures provided by the Saipan Chamber of Commerce, 50 percent of the visitors come from South Korea and 40 percent from China, and almost half of the island's revenue disappeared within a week when both markets had to stop their flights coming in. These flight suspensions and travel restrictions had resulted in cutbacks on services and hotel shut downs. Thousands of workers had their hours reduced, were laid off, furloughed, and/or terminated. The local businesses faced an economic downturn creating major changes in the financial structure and prompted the government to implement austerity measures.

Now, with these ongoing issues we are facing with tourism, should we still consider reopening the flights? Leaders of the CNMI government and business leaders are continuing to find a middle ground so the health and safety of the community isn't at risk. As of December 7, a total of 111 COVID-19 positive cases and two coronavirus-related deaths have been confirmed in Saipan since March 28. Although these individuals had been quarantined safely and moved to the designated isolation area for close monitoring, most of them were identified by travel screening and confirmed diagnosis through testing upon arrival.

I interviewed Saipan Mayor David Apatang and his special assistant, Henry Hofschneider, regarding their thoughts on the question of reopening international flights in Saipan. Both answered that it is not safe to reopen the flights at this time because we are still seeing surges of positive cases across the globe and it hasn't been stabilized. Mayor Apatang expressed that we still need to monitor the COVID-19 cases before we make the decision to allow an influx of tourists again. The positive cases tracked on Saipan are reported from the incoming flights and it is very alarming to see Guam's increasing reports of positive cases and deaths since Guam is the transit location for most of the connecting flights to and from Saipan. He strongly encouraged the community to continue to follow and comply with the guidelines and the containment measures in place. Mr. Hofschneider added, "During this period till the end of this year in December, we are very fortunate that the federal government has extended financial assistance to the CNMI to sustain commerce and assist businesses from closing their doors."

Since the Fiscal Year 2019, we were already seeing a decrease in the numbers of visitors, which was drastically approaching zero, due to power outages and the airport shutting down as a result of damage sustained from Super Typhoon Yutu in late October 2018. Without a doubt, tourism is the engine of our economy, but with many countries still entering the new phase in fighting the evolving virus, the outlook remains uncertain with the possibility of the travel restrictions and containment measures to be in place for longer periods of time. Although the CNMI has shown resilience in recent years after the recovery from the series of super typhoons that struck the islands, getting back up from the downturn of the COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be a different story. Even if an effective vaccine is developed, the impact of the pandemic will alter many things that used to be normal before the pandemic. As a community, what we can do

now is to work together and adapt to the new norm by adhering to the COVID-19 protocols to combat the pandemic and contain the spread. By doing so, we will be able to move towards community vulnerability level green, which is the safest in the chart which will allow us to prepare and be ready to welcome tourists to our islands once again.

Even though a lot of the events may have been cancelled, we were able to celebrate a few of them with new ways. \*Share photos

Before I end my speech, I want to share one story. Just the other day, this sweet lady walked into the office to pick up an application form for the Mayor's ID card. She asked for my name and she went back to her car and brought this mwarmwar to me. She laid it on my head and told me to have a safe and great day. That really made my day. So in conclusion, I want to rephrase what CNMI stands for. It's not Cannot Make It but Can Now Make It. If we all work together, we can now make it, CNMI!

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