

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

The Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands bestowed with natural beauty, intricate terrestrial habitats, and historical sites is threatened by commercial development, housing development, and military expansion. The allure attached to our chain of islands can only remain if efforts for sustainable development are endeavored. Possessing the power to unite the present with the past, conservation of our indigenous land should be a prime concern. To create a sustainable balance between land preservation and development, economic and environmental interests must work cohesively to evaluate economic outcomes and environmental ramifications of development. The efforts of sustainable land management must aim at protecting natural resources, wildlife, and historical sites, while still ensuring the benefits of land development. The establishment of a commission dedicated to preserving our precious natural resources can embody the ambassador for sustainable development among foreign, public, and private interests. Through this organization, we can build awareness of protected areas and potential revitalizations, as well as the use of conservation easements, and environmental policy to generate a balance between land conservation and development.

A conservation easement defines a voluntary agreement with a land trust or government agency that allows a landowner to limit the type or amount of development on their property while retaining private ownership of the land. The easements will prevent any land development from altering its existing natural or ecological condition. Purposes of these agreements include insuring availability for agricultural or recreational space, protecting natural resources, maintaining, or enhancing environmental quality, or preserving notable historical and cultural elements of the property. Conservation easements are perpetual and will "run with the property"; meaning that the easements are bound to future landowners. To cater to environmental changes and shifting demands, local legislation can delegate the court to evaluate proposed amendments and present alternative conservation easements that can closely serve the purpose of the easement in question. The established commission can incentivize easements through tax deductions or payments numbed to the difference in value before and after granting the easements.

In addition to conservation easement implementation, an avenue towards sustainable development involves improving our permitting processes. The Bureau of Environmental and Coastal Quality and its division of Coastal Resources Management are making strides toward mitigating the impacts of economic land development. CRM offers discounts on administration and application fees contingent on the developer's plan to rehabilitate existing structures, implement "LEED" Certifiable designs, and utilize recycling, composting, or energy-efficient appliances. The likelihood of land developers following suit can rise through bulkier incentives.

Moving forward with development on the unaltered islands of Agrigan, Pagan, Alamagan, and Anatahan, the newly established commission shall cooperate with appropriate governmental departments to outline ancestral sites, habitats of endangered species, wetlands, and shoreline boundaries. As we explore the feasibility of commercial development on these islands, the

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distribution of homesteads by the Department of Public Lands must be tightly regulated and tied to improving the likelihood of commercial land development while limiting their footprint on the ecosystem. The commission can regulate development on these homesteads and require practices for environmental sustainability such as renewable energy production, water catchment systems, and other alternatives to cut down on infrastructure needs.

In sum, the path towards sustainable development is within reach but is only achieved through the cooperation of the community and the CNMI government. If we hope to protect our legacy and the land that has shaped us, we must unite and preserve our islands. Instilling an environmental conservationist mindset within our community will carry the attitude into perpetuity for future generations to preserve our precious islands.

Sources:

CNMI Department of Public Lands, CNMI Comprehensive Public Land Use Plan Update for Rota, Tinian, Saipan, and the Northern Islands (2019).

Hamilton, J. (2015, May 27). *Understanding the debate about conservation easement amendments*. Land Trust Alliance. Retrieved November 13, 2021, from <https://www.landtrustalliance.org/news/understanding-debate-about-conservation-easement-amendments>.