

***The News UpFront: (TOP STORY) as of Monday, August 10, 2009***

The self-anointed "voice" of Filipinos and Filipino Americans across the United States

is reeling under, so admits its top official in what may be a distress call to members and officers. The candid admission could be a dire warning of worst things to come. The well from which it draws sustenance appears to be drying up, mostly because of a combination of factors, including involvement in monetary scandals, dwindling public-and-corporate support due to widespread perceptions of improprieties, absence of accountability and lack of transparency. The happy days of frolicking from one choice city to another seems to be coming to an end for the paper-giant called the NaFFAA or National Federation of Filipino American Associations. Its demise may just be a matter of time.

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**AMIDST SCANDALS, SCARCE FUNDS AND SHRINKING MEMBERSHIP:**  
Will NaFFAA Survive to Be the 'Voice' For Filipinos in  
America  
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Written by

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By Romeo P. Marquez

The author is a member of the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) and the Asian-American Journalists Association (AAJA).

**S AN DIEGO** - The much-vaunted but largely inutile "giant" of America's Filipino community organizations appears to be limping its way to extinction, no thanks to several money scandals it's currently embroiled in and a drying well of public and corporate support.

On the brink of bankruptcy or already bankrupt, NaFFAA or the National Federation of Filipino American Associations, which loops a claimed 500 member-organizations into its fold, is on tethers, a victim of the recession and shrinking financial assistance.

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"Our funds have begun to run very low for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the scarcity of corporate funds," said Greg B. Macabenta, NaFFAA national chair, as he urged members to pay up dues while bemoaning the difficulty of having a quorum for their telemeetings.

Macabenta didn't say how much money NaFFAA was surviving on and for how long it could manage to stay afloat, nor did he say how flat broke it was. When asked, he did not respond to queries from this reporter.

This is the first time that an official of the federation has publicly acknowledged dwindling support from traditional sources -- a fact attributed by its staunchest critic, journalist Bobby Reyes of Los Angeles, to perceptions of financial improprieties and lack of accountability and transparency.

The most-recent transaction that put NaFFAA under minute scrutiny involved a community organization in San Jose which had allocated huge sums of taxpayers money to fund NaFFAA's conference in that Northern California city.

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The deal -- Reyes dubbed it "Menorgate" (from community organizer Ben Menor) -- generated several lawsuits and highlighted the lingering suspicion of wrongdoing by NaFFAA's top officials.

"There is one urgent matter that needs to be attended to by all the regions and I appeal to the regional chairs to attend to it immediately. This is the matter of membership dues," Macabenta wrote in a letter dated August 5.

His statement reflected the ongoing hard times, a far cry from the heady days when big business, politicians and other favor-seekers showered it with largesse in hopes of capturing a huge market of voters and consumers it bragged to represent.

Its "global" conferences were no more than public boasts of its vaunted strength as "the Voice of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans throughout the United States" and an avenue to network with corporate sponsors and individuals wishing to do business with an estimated four-million Filipino Americans with a spending power of about \$80 billion.

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When the NaFFAA articulates a position on pressing issues, the "voice" becomes a mild echo of a few, the sound so narrowly limited to its own box of ill-defined concerns. One example was the fight for equity for Filipino veterans where it cast its support with a group led by a lobbyist denounced by a San Diego congressman as a scam artist.

Reyes has been keeping track of NaFFAA's movements, particularly of its unpublished financial outlays, since it was founded in 1997 by newspaper publisher/editor Alex Esclamado and some friends.

"The NaFFAA used to receive donations in the hundreds of thousands of dollars from major foundations such as the Bank of America (BA) and Wells Fargo Bank (WFB) but hints of financial impropriety ended the grants," according to Reyes.

"For instance, the Wells Fargo Foundation gave the NaFFAA \$300,000 in 2002. The grant was secured by Greg Macabenta, then a NaFFAA national executive officer, whose company, the Minority Media, was paid commissions that were not reflected in the NaFFAA financial statement for

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2002," Reyes wrote in his top-rated MabuhayRadio.com website.

Editor's Note: Bobby Reyes has confirmed in writing that for as long as Dr. Joy Bruce is with the NaFFAA national leadership as the chairperson of its new Development Committee, he "hold our horses and not criticize the NaFFAA national executive officers." The dialogue between Dr. Bruce and Bobby Reyes is reproduced at the end of this article in the User's Comments.

As of this writing, Macabenta, who owns two publications and an advertising company based in Daly City in Northern California, has not responded to questions emailed to him.

In a published statement, however, Macabenta implored his officers and members, thus: "Because of the hard times, we need to hunker down and focus on our bedrock objectives, namely, the continued survival of NaFFAA and the continuation of our mission of advocacy, within our means."

To dramatize the financial ill-health of the federation, Macabenta said it had

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to downsize its office in Washington, DC "to a room at the ACA building". "We have been unable to pay our office rent," he stressed, and "also need to cover our payables to our administrative assistant, Les Talusan, as well as utilities".

A regional chair, Ed Navarra, wrote in exasperation: "Maybe Greg (Macabenta) should hold a press conference and announce that NaFFAA be dissolved! It will be a wake up call, wouldn't it?"

The federation's money troubles were graphically illustrated in the case of its former executive director, Doy Heredia, during the time of Macabenta's predecessor, Alma Q. Kern, of Seattle, Washington.

A NaFFAA co-founder in Philadelphia, Ernesto Gange, narrated how Heredia struck a deal with another former NaFFAA chair, Loida Nicolas Lewis, to recover wages totalling \$20,000 that had not been paid by NaFFAA.

"Doy (Heredia) contacted Loida about his unpaid salaries. Loida proposed to

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Doy, and he agreed, that Loida will pay him \$20,000, to settle the whole account, and forget the difference. Loida paid Doy the sum of \$10,000 down money and she paid the balance of \$10,000, a few months later," Gange wrote.

From Gange's email, it seems quite evident that efforts to expand NaFFAA's membership base and increase collection were not so eagerly pursued.

"I suspect that in the previous years," Gange said, "the Executive Director (Heredia) did not go out and raise money and collect the memberships dues (was) because he was dependent on Loida.

"It was Doy who told us in Seattle, that, when the national office is low in cash, he just called Loida and the bills were paid. The ex-o did nothing to get the membership involved because he did not need them then, as long as Loida paid him, it is okay," he added.

The NaFFAA maintains a physical presence in Washington, DC, to lobby

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and project an image of bigness as the sole unifying entity representing the many disparate organizations in Filipino American communities.

Its ambitious goal to get all Filipinos together under one huge umbrella has remained elusive largely because of leadership problems.

Now that NaFFAA has fallen on hard times, the questions that require immediate answers are: will it recover from widespread distrusts and survive the lean economic situation?

"For a public organization to survive, one needs The Community to be informed and to be involved (a national organization is not just made up of a few select group of people)," said Dr. Joy Bruce, a former regional chair and a popular community leader in Florida who runs the non-profit National Alliance to Nurture the Aged and the Youth (NANAY), an active member of NaFFAA since 1998.

She continues: "The members need to feel that they belong, that they are listened to, that there are benefits attached to membership, that they are

making a difference, that they can connect, that they have the power to transform-- and that they are not ostracized just because they happen to disagree with the authority or the national officers".

Indeed, explained Reyes, "One does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what went wrong with the NaFFAA.

"When many of its national executive officers refused to do the tenets of accountability and transparency," Reyes adds, "corporate and individual donors stopped giving good money after bad. And Filipino Americans started to treat the NaFFAA as if it were the plague."

### **Is NaFFAA plagued within by a plague?**

Concludes Dr. Bruce: "NaFFAA has had long-standing problems that never seemed to be resolved, because the solutions applied have always been the same, only packaged in a different way.

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"Perhaps it is time to look at NaFFAA in a different light now, and make it more pro-active, more practical, and more community-friendly". # # #

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