

Community Voice

# A Banner Year For Secrecy, Behind-The-Scenes Maneuvering At The Legislature

From reducing poverty to increasing affordable housing, lawmakers could have done much better for the people of Hawaii.

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By Gene Ward  / May 25, 2017

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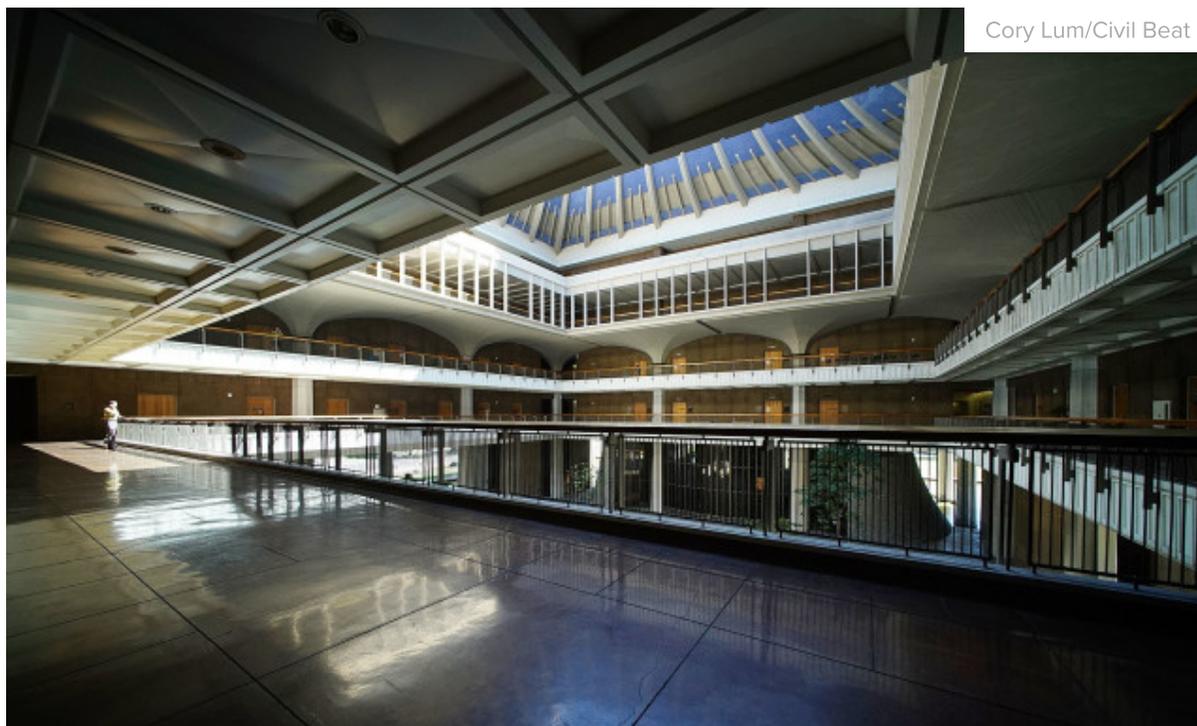
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In the wake of the 2017 legislative session, some commenters have given the Legislature an undeserved pat on the back. The truth is that we could and should have done much better for the people of Hawaii this session.

The heart of a strong, healthy democracy should be vigorous debate. Unfortunately, outside observers agree that this was a banner year for secrecy and behind-the-scenes maneuvering at the Legislature.

As former Speaker Rep. Joe Souki – who wasn’t “former” until the final hours of the 2017 session – recently admitted, “We are always secretive. It’s part of being a legislator.”

When it came to doing the people’s business, the Legislature repeatedly dropped the ball.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

The Legislature turned in a dubious performance last session at the Hawaii Capitol.

## Reducing Poverty — But Not Enough

The Legislature finally passed a version of a state earned income tax credit to help low-income working families ([House Bill 209](#)), but it is unfortunate that it took so long and only resulted in a half-measure. The federal EITC is the most efficient and effective federal program to reduce poverty. That's why the Republican caucus introduced a more fiscally responsible bill to create a state EITC in each of the past two sessions.

The majority's version unwisely increases taxes on high-earning job creators, threatening the jobs of the very same working families they claim to help. In addition, because the credit is non-refundable, the poor will only really benefit from half of the tax increase while the state coffers keep the rest.

The Republican caucus has introduced measures to eliminate general excise taxes on food and medical services for years. Unfortunately, the majority has not given a fair hearing to these proposals to reduce the heavy burden of our state's unusually regressive tax system on the working poor. To be frank, the only real cost-of-living reductions experienced by the people of Hawaii

have come from Walmart, Costco and Target, not policymakers in the Legislature.

## Doing Little On Affordable Housing

The Legislature's actions on housing this session amount to only a single drop in the ocean of Hawaii's affordable housing shortage, which has now reached over 45,000 units.

There are two real ways to increase the affordability of housing, but the Legislature did neither of them.

First, the state could actually pay for significant amounts of affordable housing construction — but there's no money in this budget to accomplish that.

Second, the state could help the market meet demand by clearing away the restrictions and red tape that too often prevent private developers from taking action to increase the housing supply.

Instead, the majority wasted time considering just how much more red tape to add in transit-oriented development zones around the rail project. It refused to even consider selling development rights along the rail corridor — something that Japan and Hong Kong do all the time to raise private sector funds.

## Threatening The Judiciary And Faith-Based Organizations

Unfortunately, one thing the Legislature actually did accomplish this year was threatening the majority's enemies. The majority caucus in the House insisted on passing a measure that would have cut judges' pensions ([Senate Bill 249](#)), against the advice of the Salary Commission and every sense of decency to the Judiciary.

All minority members spoke out, loud and clear, against this measure. Thankfully, it finally died in conference committee.

The Legislature also took aim at faith-based organizations with an unconstitutional bill that will force pro-life pregnancy centers to put signs in their windows to advertise programs that provide free abortions and contraception ([Senate Bill 501](#)). This ill-conceived and malicious bill goes even further than a similar California law currently before the U.S. Supreme Court.

In summary, according to some veteran observers, the 2017 Legislature was one of the worst sessions in the past 40 years. Anyone who claims the 2017 session wasn't an embarrassment would need a very large fig leaf to cover all of the Legislature's errors and omissions.

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## About the Author



### Gene Ward

Rep. Gene Ward (R-Hawaii Kai, Kalama Valley) is a Vietnam veteran and former presidential appointee as a senior democracy officer in the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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