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Editorial | Island Voices

# A few wins for good government, but other 'no brainer' bills fail

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May 24, 2015



ASSOCIATED PRESS

A packed conference room of interested parties observed the action during a House and Senate conference committee in May, usually the last step before a bill advances to a final floor vote, on the way to becoming law.

The start of the 2015 legislative session showed promise: this year, a record-breaking 400-plus democracy-related bills were introduced. While some measures were more helpful in strengthening our democracy than others, the volume of democracy-related bills alone was enough for us to tread with cautious optimism.

Two “wins” worth noting relate to ethics and money-in-politics.

Senate Bill 996, introduced by Sen. Les Ihara, updates the state Ethics Commission’s filing platform so that all reports filed with the commission — including lobbyist expenditure forms, and public financial disclosure statements from elected officials and certain board and commission members — will be accessible via a new data system. That system will make it easier for citizens to conduct online search queries, and extract such data for analysis.

Sen. Laura Thielen introduced Senate Bill 508 that creates an additional filing for “super PACs,” which had attempted to manipulate voters. The Legislature recognized the need to make special interest “outside” money more transparent, especially given the unprecedented amount of big money that we saw flood our 2014 elections.

We had high hopes that other “no brainer” good-government bills would survive the Legislature, but that was not the case.

Rep. Nicole Lowen once again introduced a bill that would have allowed Hawaii citizens to present live oral testimony at legislative hearings through videoconferencing. The bill, which would have been particularly helpful for Neighbor Island and rural Oahu residents wanting to participate more actively at the Legislature, was killed.

The aftermath of Tropical Storm Iselle — which hit in the midst of the 2014 primary election — brought to light glaring gaps in our election laws.

For example: Ballot count results are allowed to be announced, despite two precincts still outstanding. We also were reminded that there is still no accountability mechanism for the chief elections officer. Considering the intense public scrutiny, it had seemed a sure shot that election bills aimed at closing these gaps would have passed into law.

At the core of citizen participation in elections, and in our democracy, is the trust that people have in government. By reducing the amount of special interest money in politics — and by extension the perception of corruption — we take a step toward revitalizing public trust in our public servants.

The state Campaign Spending Commission is the agency that enforces money-in-politics laws. Currently, its general operating expenses come out of the Hawaii Election Campaign Fund — which was created to support publicly funded elections, according to the Hawaii Constitution.

Because there is a limited amount

of money in the fund, we need to take proactive measures to preserve the

future and sustainability of the

commission and our existing partial public-funding program. Senate Bill 577

addressed these concerns, but was ultimately killed in conference committee.

Bills aside, one noteworthy event was how Thielen conducted the Senate committee confirmation hearing for Carleton Ching, nominated to lead the state Land Board. Her efforts to increase the level of transparency in the “appointment and consent” process deserves applause. By posting Ching’s resumé, responses to committee questions and public testimony online before the hearing, she set a new precedent for how Senate committee confirmation hearings might be handled.

We look forward to seeing how new Senate President Ron Kouchi and his leadership team approaches this practice as well as other good-government issues.

While there were wins for good-government bills this past session, common-sense bills to further strengthen our democracy were put by the wayside. Our legislators need encouragement — call yours, and ask them to prioritize voting, transparency and reducing special-interest money in politics in the next legislative session.

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