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Accountability, Election Reform Top Good-Government Bill List

By Nathan Eagle CONNECT | 01/21/2014

Hawaii lawmakers last week started hearing bills to boost government transparency, improve elections and hold public officials more accountable.

In the first week of the 2014 legislative session, one of the many so-called good-government bills has already cleared its final House committee and is headed to a final vote before all the reps.

House Bill 1072 would make public the financial disclosure reports filed by the University of Hawaii Board of Regents.

Advocates say the measure would help improve public confidence in government.

"We feel that when board members are responsible for decisions on matters in the public interest the public should be able to know if any member has a personal financial or economic stake in the matter," the Hawaii League of Women Voters wrote in its [testimony](#).

"The proposed addition of the members of the UH Board of Regents to those whose disclosure filing is available for public scrutiny is in consonance with the scope and power associated with their responsibilities and authority," the group said. "For government to work people must have faith in the integrity of its officials."

The Board of Regents opposes the bill because it "will chill the willingness of excellent potential candidates to consider volunteering on state boards and commissions."

The group says adequate protections against conflicts of interest already exist.

"Requiring public disclosure of financial statements adds nothing more to these safeguards, but instead imposes an unnecessary burden that is a barrier for many highly qualified candidates who would otherwise consider making the moral sacrifice and volunteer to serve their community on a state board or commission."

The Judiciary Committee, chaired by Rep. Karl Rhoads, unanimously passed HB1072 Thursday. The bill had already cleared the only other committee it was referred to, the Higher Education Committee, last session so the legislation now heads to the House floor for full vote.

Perhaps the broadest disclosure bill introduced last session, the first year of the biennium, was [House Bill 207](#), part of the Ethics Commission's legislative package.

The bill calls for making public the financial disclosure statements of the Board of Regents as well as seven other boards and commissions, such as the Public Utilities Commission and Board of Land and Natural Resources.

The bill cleared the House Consumer Protection Committee, chaired by Rep. Angus McKelvey, last session but stalled in the Finance Committee, chaired by Rep. Sylvia Luke.

Carmille Lim, executive director of [Common Cause Hawaii](#), said there are plans to have a bill introduced this session that would require the financial disclosure statements of multiple boards, though not so many as to overwhelm the Ethics Commission's limited staff that is in charge of reviewing them.

House Majority Leader Scott Saiki said lawmakers intend to pick up an ethics bill that got shelved last session that would close an inadvertent loophole in the [fair treatment provision](#) of the state's lobbying law.

Three years ago, the Legislature passed an amendment to give additional exemptions to state task force members. But in the process, they deleted language limiting the exemption, broadening it to include lawmakers too.

As Ethics Executive Director Les Kondo now reads the law, legislators and task force members are exempt from all actions they take in their legislative capacity. The loophole may have [spared one senator](#) already — Josh Green, a doctor who found himself ethically compromised in a matter involving a healthcare billing company.

Lawmakers want to restore the law to its previous version, Saiki said.

In other disclosure-related bills, Saiki and Reps. Chris Lee and Della Au Belatti have introduced a bill that proposes a constitutional amendment to make public the list of judicial nominees.

[House Bill 420](#) has its first hearing scheduled Thursday before the Judiciary Committee.

Given this is an election year, bloggers like [Ian Lind](#) are wondering if Gov. [Neil Abercrombie](#) will continue to oppose disclosing the names.

"The issue has been on the back burner for the past two years, but the bill could again highlight Governor



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Abercrombie's past opposition to such disclosure," Lind noted in a post earlier this month.

Improving Hawaii's beleaguered elections is another area good-government groups want to focus on this session.

Common Cause has made the issue its top priority, Lim said.

Bills to create same-day voter registration and publicly funded elections for House seats died at the end of the last session because lawmakers were unable to agree on the final language.

Saiki said lawmakers this session will revisit the effort to establish a system to publicly fund elections for House members.

Common Cause is looking at having new bills introduced this session for cleaner elections and same-day voter registration, Lim said.

The group hopes to add new legislative victories on to the measures it helped push to passage last session.

In 2013, Common Cause successfully fought for [House Bill 1147](#). The group says the bill limits the influence of special interest spending by requiring independent committees to disclose their largest donors in their ads so voters can judge for themselves whether to heed the messages.

The group also championed [House Bill 1132](#) to passage. Common Cause says the bill requires state lawmakers to report their financial interests at the beginning of the legislative session instead of after it's over so the public can see potential conflicts of interest sooner rather than later.

Many of the good-government bills introduced last session failed to pass, including all eight bills in the [Ethics Commission's legislative package](#). But the commission still plans to be active this session testifying on bills.

On a different good-government front, the Campaign Spending Commission has [several bills in its package](#) it will likely be pushing toward passage again this session.

In an apparent effort to boost compliance in filing reports, [House Bill 1604](#) would prevent a candidate from receiving a certificate of election until the candidate has filed the necessary disclosure reports and pays any of the commission's assessed fines.

The latter part would apply to reps like Karen Awana who was re-elected to another term last election [despite having outstanding fines](#).

Other campaign spending bills, like [Senate Bill 2117](#) and [House Bill 201](#), would change reporting deadlines to make the disclosures more useful to the public and require the identification of the candidate supported or opposed by an independent expenditure among other things.

Lim said she sees a growing number of lawmakers interested in pushing legislation to improve things like transparency, elections and accountability.

"We feel like we have stronger support from people who want to step up and be good-government advocates," she said.

DISCUSSION: *What bills would you like to see lawmakers pass this session?*

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