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Common Cause reopens Hawaii branch, targets special interests

By MARK NIESSE
Associated Press

The national government watchdog group Common Cause aims to remove the influence of big money and special interests on lawmakers as it returns to Hawaii after a six-year absence.

The nonpartisan advocacy organization relaunched its Hawaii chapter today with a goal to clean up state government.

"We need to get money out of politics. We have seen the negative impact of special interests," said Bob Edgar, national Common Cause president. "I'm proud that these folks in Hawaii have kept the dream alive that government can work."

Common Cause is urging Republican Gov. Linda Lingle to sign into law a measure that would set up publicly funded elections on the Big Island. Edgar said he had scheduled a meeting with Lingle to discuss the issue.

Even before the Hawaii branch of Common Cause was officially re-established, the group's activists helped stop a proposal that would have allowed corporations to make direct donations to candidates in Hawaii. The measure would have treated companies the same as individuals, permitting them to give between \$2,000 and \$6,000 to political candidates.

"The mission is to strengthen public participation and faith in our institutions of self government to ensure that government and political processes serve the general interest rather than special interests," said Nikki Love, spokeswoman for the Hawaii Common Cause chapter.

Hawaii is the 37th state where Common Cause is active, and it will likely become the 19th state with paid staff, Edgar said. Common Cause had been dormant in Hawaii since 2002, in part because of disorganization and funding disputes on the national level.

Hawaii needs Common Cause to ensure fair and transparent government, said Larry Meacham, executive director of the Hawaii branch from 1993 to 2002.

"You need constant pressure on government to keep meetings and documents open," he said. "There are always people who misbehave, and we need to go after them."

One lawmaker, Rep. Tom Brower, said he welcomed Common Cause's return to the islands and the group's advocacy for a test-run of publicly funded elections.

"I think it's an experiment worth trying," said Brower, D-Waikiki-Ala Moana. "Every state has a need for more transparency."

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