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Editorial | Our View

Don't leave politics to just politicians

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As the Legislature prepares to open for business on Jan. 20, it's worth remembering why it's important to pay attention. Of the 2,894 bills introduced in the 2015 session, only 252 passed. Of those, 243 became law. Such a low passage rate is typical, and may make it easy to ignore the Legislature's daily work. But what doesn't pass can be as important as what does. And what becomes law can have a direct effect on our lives.

The following laws, for better or worse, took effect Jan. 1:

>> Raising the smoking age: Act 122 increases the age requirement for obtaining and using tobacco products — as well as electronic smoking devices — from 18 to 21.

The law is not a perfect one; 18-year-olds are legal adults, and electronic smoking devices often contain neither nicotine or tobacco. Nonetheless, raising the age is good health policy. It may deter more young adults in the 18-21 age range, a choice target for tobacco advertising, from picking up a habit that is both addictive and dangerous to their health.

>> Banning e-cigarettes: Act 19 prohibits the use of electronic smoking devices in places where smoking is banned.

The jury is still out on the health effects of e-cigarettes, which are used to vaporize a wide variety of substances, including tobacco. But as vaping is intended to mimic smoking, including the dispersal of aerosol vapor, it makes sense to apply similar regulations to e-cigarette use in public places.

>> Limited purpose driver's license: Act 172 creates a driver's license or permit for those who can't — or won't — provide the documentation required under the federal REAL ID Act, which includes proof the person is residing legally in the U.S. The federal law allows this exception to help those who need to drive, while preventing them from using the license for federal identification purposes, such as boarding an airplane.

Opponents object to giving people who may be in the country illegally a state-sanctioned license; supporters say the licensing scheme means more drivers will be tested and carry insurance, leading to safer roads.

>> Voter registration: Act 166 allows a person to register to vote at an absentee polling place in the county where he or she lives.

Beginning in 2018, a person can register to vote on election day.

Another law taking effect with the 2016 primary election, Act 225, authorizes the acceptance of electronic applications to register to vote. No longer will mailed or in-person registration be the only ways to register. It's hoped that lowering some of the barriers to voting will help improve Hawaii's dismal voter turnout — among the worst in the nation — especially since 2016 is a presidential election year.

>> Open captioning for movies: Act 39 offers commendable support for deaf and blind people by requiring most theaters to provide open captioning and audio descriptions for movies that come so equipped. Hawaii's law is the first of its kind in the nation.

>> Taxes: Act 97 does away with the deduction for state taxes paid for higher-income taxpayers.

Act 93 increases the transient accommodations tax imposed on resort time-share vacation units by 1 percentage point each year, until it reaches 9.25 percent of fair market rental value.

And Act 204 authorizes the state tax department to enforce civil penalties against those who operate transient accommodations and time-share vacation plans and fail to display certificates of registration and registration ID numbers.

Other laws with broader implications also took effect at the beginning of the year. Among them was Act 121, which appropriates \$35 million to acquire a conservation easement and other property at Turtle Bay. The deal will prevent a significant portion of Kawela Bay and environs from being developed as an expansion of the Turtle Bay Resort.

The Legislature also passed laws that improved reporting requirements for noncandidate committees and reduced the amount of donations a candidate can receive from anonymous donors at a political function — small but heartening steps toward a more transparent election process.

What bills make it through this year's legislative session remain anyone's guess. But two things are clear: What becomes law can affect Hawaii citizens directly and immediately; and like the lobbyists and political insiders who already are hard at work, you can influence what the Legislature approves — or rejects — in 2016.

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