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Hawaii News

Financial disclosures will widen

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Gov. Neil Abercrombie says he will allow pending legislation to become law that adds members of 15 state boards and commissions to the list of public officials whose financial interests are publicly disclosed.

The decision comes one week after signaling his intent to veto the legislation, but instead he is allowing it to become law without his signature.

Under Senate Bill 2682 — which unanimously passed both chambers of the state Legislature — the annual financial disclosure statements of members of the University of Hawaii's Board of Regents, the state Ethics Commission, Public Utilities Commission, Hawaii Community Development Authority, Board of Land and Natural Resources, Land Use Commission and others would become public records available on the Ethics Commission's website.

The forms contain such financial information as income sources and amounts, investments, debts, ownership or interests in businesses, and real estate holdings for themselves, their spouse and dependent children.

The disclosures are intended to help the Ethics Commission identify potential conflicts of interest, but the commission said in supporting testimony that its ability to do so is limited because of the large volume of statements filed and its small staff. The commission testified that the public is in a better position to help raise concerns.

Opponents had argued the move would discourage community members from service.

Members of some of the affected boards and agencies had asked the governor to veto the bill, citing privacy issues. Two UH regents — John Dean and Saedene Ota —

resigned from the university's governing board in June over concerns about the bill becoming law.

State Sen. David Ige, Abercrombie's challenger in the Democratic primary, had criticized the governor for including the bill on his veto list.

In a letter Monday to the state Senate president and House speaker, Abercrombie said after reviewing the merits of the bill, it "seems reasonable" to allow it to become law with the aim of identifying potential conflicts.

"When it comes to the role of volunteer participation in the policy and decision-making process of governing in a democracy, the power of government to intrude in people's lives becomes far more than a technical issue," Abercrombie wrote.

"There are tough issues to be considered in this bill with competing values: Legitimate inquiry into possible conflicts regarding the public interest versus legitimate concerns about personal information on family, finances, credit history and medical records becoming cannon fodder in political battles."

Good-government group Common Cause Hawaii, which lobbied for the bill, welcomed the governor's decision.

"After considering his options carefully, we're pleased to see that the governor has decided to let SB 2682 become law, even without his signature," said the group's executive director, Carmille Lim. "We must do everything we can to improve public confidence in our government, and this pro-transparency bill is a big step in that direction."