

CIVIL BEAT EDITORIAL

Hawaii Needs Political Heroes To Step Up In 2016

These five big issues would be well-served by state leaders with the vision and guts to do right by citizens rather than special interests.

JANUARY 4, 2016 · By The Civil Beat Editorial Board 

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With the opening ceremony of the 2016 legislative session just 16 days away, the once-each-decade consideration of [potential amendments to the Honolulu City Charter](#) in full swing and countless other opportunities to affect public policy and the quality of life in Hawaii, the coming year holds promise for moving Hawaii forward in significant ways.

It's also an election year, which usually means policy makers are loath to make any waves. But there are important decisions on the table in 2016 that shouldn't be held hostage to political concerns.

Here are five key issues that will have ripples for years to come and define Hawaii's leaders — for better or for worse.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat



A range of police reform measures are among the opportunities in 2016 for progress benefiting the public.

Police Reform. Last year's efforts at meaningful reform for law enforcement were really a series of single initiatives. There wasn't a lot of unity around them as cohesive reform ideas, other than the legislative committees in which most of them met their end.

But interest in a training and standards board, an independent review board for officer-involved shootings and use of force, funding for body cameras and more transparency in police misconduct cases has had a year to germinate. A package of initiatives that complement and build off each other should be [ready to bear fruit this spring](#).

As happened last year, the single biggest roadblock to reform may come in the form of Sen. Gil Keith-Agaran, chair of the [Senate Judiciary and Labor Committee](#). He needs to be part of a collaborative solution this year — not just the senator endorsed by the [State of Hawaii Organization of Police Officers](#). It's the senator, along with SHOPO, who too often stands in the way of measures that would be every bit as good for law enforcement as for the public it polices.

Progress in Housing. Legislators invested precious little last session in affordable housing, public housing maintenance and repair, and efforts to address homelessness.

The lack of investment made fiscal year 2016, which runs through the end of June, one in which Hawaii not only won't keep up with the growing needs in each area, but in some will fall farther

behind, adding complexity and scale to the overall challenge of putting proper roofs over the heads of all of Hawaii's people.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Public housing needs real investment in places like these boarded up units, if Hawaii is to deal more successfully with homelessness and affordable housing issues this year.

With the better bond environment that Gov. David Ige's administration has helped to create through careful financial management, near full employment across the state and the national economic recovery continuing to expand, Hawaii will have access to more resources this year to make significant commitments to housing.

If the state is to escape its self-declared homeless emergency and to meet the challenge of affordable housing, even as Hawaii's real estate market continues

to boom and housing prices rise, legislators must make peace with the fact that progress is going to cost real money. Avoiding that reality will only make the price tag a bit fatter the next year.

That doesn't mean creative solutions aren't welcome. The [state's current conversion of a large maintenance shed in Kakaako](#) into a temporary shelter for as many as 240 people a year is a great idea. But even that basic, quick-turnaround renovation will cost an estimated \$750,000.

On housing, we must be ready to put our money where our needs are, and stop kicking the can — which has been kicked so many times it doesn't even resemble a can any more — down a never-ending road.

Rail Crackdown. And that sentiment naturally brings us to the Honolulu rail project. We're increasingly unconvinced additional money is needed because what's already been committed has been so imprudently spent.

Only a little more than a year ago, this project was still being billed as "on budget and on time." Budget overruns to the tune of \$1.5 billion have been announced since then, which made the rate of budget bloat about \$125 million a month over the course of 2015.

To paraphrase the old rich-guy joke, \$100 million here, \$100 million there, and pretty soon you're talking real money. Only this isn't a laughing matter.

The guideway for the 20-mile, 21-stop project is a little over 5 miles done. The Honolulu City Council still must consider an extension of the tax largely funding the project in its budget committee next

Sum must consider an extension of the tax largely funding the project in its budget committee next week and as a full Council on Jan. 26.

Council Chair Ernie Martin and his colleagues must find a way to force greater accountability and more oversight on to the [Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation](#). Honolulu taxpayers simply cannot afford and must not be asked to pour a single additional year of general excise tax funds into a black hole of overruns from which meaningful financial management never seems to materialize and from which complete explanations never seem to emerge.



Progress on the 20-mile guideway continues, but so does the runaway budget bloat that has the Honolulu rail project \$1.5 billion over budget.

NextEra Decision. There have been many opportunities to review and discuss the \$4.3 billion deal that Florida-based NextEra has put on the table to purchase Hawaiian Electric Industries. To say that the proposed buyout met with a lukewarm reception would be putting it mildly.

From Gov. Ige to Hawaii’s Consumer Advocate to community groups and state legislators, many in leadership roles publicly criticized the deal and doubted the heft or reliability of 85 pledges NextEra put in writing to help push the takeover through. Most prominently, Ige has questioned whether selling the century-old utility to a mainland company is in the best interests of Hawaii.

NextEra has countered that its commitment to improving Hawaii’s power generation and distribution system is genuine. It made that case in a series of public meetings across the islands as well as in 12 days of hearings before the Hawaii Public Utilities Commission as the year drew to a close. And many Hawaii business and labor organizations are backing a NextEra-HECO merger.



How best to move forward with energy is one of the biggest issues facing Hawaii, where the cost of electricity is three times that of the mainland. It affects virtually every aspect of life in the islands, including whether this state will continue to grow economically.

The PUC is expected to rule on the acquisition proposal by

PUC Chair Randy Iwase and his commission colleagues are expected to announce by this summer their decision on NextEra's acquisition of Hawaii Electric.

summer. Hawaii's leaders, including the PUC, need to carefully consider the proposed merger from a number of angles and do what truly is in the best interests of the state over the very long

term. A knee-jerk reaction against outsiders, as we saw emerge in the recent PUC hearings, is not helpful.

Hawaii's residents and businesses desperately deserve thoughtful analysis and consideration of this proposal.

Public Integrity. Hawaii's [unfortunate grade of D+](#) in the latest national anti-corruption report card from the Center for Public Integrity was a major embarrassment that could have been worse had it not been for the fact that 46 other states scored even lower.

This is an area in which state legislators could chart real, meaningful progress in 2016 — progress that wouldn't cost taxpayers a dime, but that might result in real savings, as well as better governance.

Hawaii earned its poor grade for a range of shortcomings that could be easily addressed if only the political will could be mustered. Those include requiring better oversight of potential conflicts of interest by lawmakers and judges and more effective disclosure and regulation of lobbying and special interests who have business before the Legislature and administration.

Is there anyone in the Legislature who has the political courage to take this on and work it through? Hawaii very much needs a champion of ethics and integrity in this one-party dominated state, since citizens are blocked from taking up issues on their own because Hawaii lacks a statewide citizen initiative process.

Here's hoping that political heroes will emerge in 2016. Even if it is an election year.

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Natalie Iwasa, Community Advocate

Speaking of rail, HART continues to provide numbers that don't add up, and I mean that literally. During the 12/17/15 discussion of the change orders for Kiewit on the West Oahu Farrington Highway contract, HART staff showed a slide that has a \$4,000 math error. I realize the amount is relatively small, but it shows yet again that we cannot rely on their numbers.

Like · Reply · 7 · Jan 4, 2016 3:18am



John Bond

Odd how Civil Beat has let the opportunity of writing public service stories on the Honolulu Charter Commission slip by -other than a last minute story by Ian Lind.

Former Governor John Waihee's said in a StarAd story that he does not want the Charter Commission "being used as a cheap route to have a referendum on rail..." so the pro rail developer stacked commission deferred any requests to allow that - while pushing forward all the pro rail and pro developer amendments.

So again any hope of allowing the Hawaii public any actual say on how the organized crime Honolulu Rail scheme is run is shoved aside by the usual insiders. And Civil Beat says little if anything about it.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jan 6, 2016 5:56pm



Roy Kamisato · University of Hawaii at Manoa

Political heroes are ravaged by the news media. This means everyone must play it safe or face defeat at the polls. What we need is a news media hero who is willing to make truth and accuracy their top priority instead of playing to their readers fears.

Like · Reply · 6 · Jan 4, 2016 8:30am



Patricia Blair · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

That is apparent with Civil Beat, Roy.

Like · Reply · 3 · Jan 4, 2016 9:32am



Rick Tubania · University of Hawaii at Manoa

Patricia Blair - roy was referring to cb but not in the positive way - that cb does not report on issues truthfully and accurately, they spin the facts attempting to create controversy when there is none.

Like · Reply · Jan 4, 2016 10:25am



Patricia Blair · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Rick Tubania Why do you read?

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jan 4, 2016 12:43pm

[Show 2 more replies in this thread](#)



Patricia Blair · University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I think that the term "Heros" is over used. I think a "good human being" is more appropriate. It implies, integrity, honesty, caring. The issues of concern chosen by Civil Beat are primary for Hawaii. Plus I would add less military presence.

Like · Reply ·  6 · Jan 4, 2016 9:36am



Joe Pacheco · University of Hawaii

Dear Civil Beat editorial board, you got this one all wrong.

Hawaii needs PEOPLE to step up, not politicians. If the people show that they care and are willing to vote the politicians in or out because of an issue then we will see some action.

Like · Reply ·  10 · Jan 4, 2016 1:09pm



Bart Dame

Joe, I think they didn't get it all wrong. I think they got it half-right. And you provided the otehr half. There is a saying, "When the people lead, the leaders will follow."

I have found that saying is also "half-right." The BETTER politicians will respond by aligning htemselfs with the people. The "more junk" ones will align with the special interests and the status quo.

So let's lead. And re-elect those politicians gutsy enough to follow rather than obstruct.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jan 5, 2016 1:05pm



Joe Pacheco · University of Hawaii

Bart Dame Thanks Bart, maybe I just have a problem with their headline. I've never relied upon political leaders to solve my problems, so it seems false to say we need "political heroes."

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jan 5, 2016 2:06pm



Blake McElheny

Anyone takig the time to watch the PUC hearings would appreciate the "thoughtful analysis and consideration of this proposal" that both the PUC and other stakeholders are providing to insure the public interest is protected. I am not sure how many hours of the hearing Mr. Simmons or other members of the Civil Beat Editorial Board watched, but you seriously misrepresent what took place with your characterization. Please consider taking another look at the hearings at <https://www.youtube.com/user/olelocm> and you will discover some real heroes looking out for residents and the future of Hawaii.

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jan 4, 2016 4:19pm · Edited



Robert Manning · Church College of Hawaii

It is lucky for us taxpayers that this is an election year...Even the SHEEPLE wake up in this time of the year....A heck of a lot of politicians had better watch very carefully what they do this year, because they will fall down just like London bridge....

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jan 4, 2016 5:32pm



Stan Fichtman · Honolulu, Hawaii

In regard to this article, I refer back to a community leader and their comments said in a meeting I was attending now six years ago: "We have had 50 years of people saying 'this is where we are and this is where we want to be.'" But do we go where we want to go?, No. Because we expect the bigness of the person saying it to be the thing that bring us together. Or the bigness of the project to bring us all together. But there is nothing that big to do that. But there is another quesiton that needs to be asked is 'who are we?' Are we the kind of people that only care about the people in the same perspective? If the answer to that is no, then why do we let those items get in the way of where we want to go?" Think about that and, if you can find a solution to that, then a piece like this becomes not a wish list of what we want, but a to-do punchcard list of things that we can get done in this State.

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 4, 2016 6:39pm



Frank De Giacomo

We need voter owned elections, until then we're just whistling in the wind.

Like · Reply · 5 · Jan 4, 2016 7:20pm



Debra Kekaulua · Executive Committee at Self Employed and Loving It!

Speaking of heroes, Independence from US beligerent military occupation by having these billionaires hawaiian residents, ellison bought lanai AND an airlines leaving a monopoly played out by Hawaiian, another CB Omidyer has ideas of a kauai dairy on archeologically heavy lands upwind from Hyatt and residents, as well as the FB mogul new father 99% promise. Integrated citizens with choke funding. willingly and to save face america must fess up and or remove militaropolitical

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 5, 2016 12:47am



Christine Trecker

Good piece CB editorial board, especially regarding the need for legislators to champion ethics and integrity in our government. That is basic to addressing the other issues on your list and to running a government that serves citizens not special interests. Bills introduced this year relating to public funding of campaigns and to strengthening the Campaign Spending Commission (a vital watchdog agency!) should be priorities for legislators and citizens alike.

Like · Reply · 1 · Jan 5, 2016 12:46pm

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