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Editorial | On Politics

Ige's election bodes well for open state government

By [Richard Borreca](#)

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It is a telling sign of both the problems of Hawaii state government and the fresh thinking guiding our new governor that Gov. David Ige is pledging an open administration.

Four years ago, when former Gov. Neil Abercrombie came into office and starting shutting the doors and turning off the lights to government, reporters were surprised to find that Abercrombie during his campaign actually had said very little about caring for transparency in government.

His actions in refusing to release the names of state Supreme Court nominees, cutting off questions at news conferences and keeping private his executive orders and emergency declarations all showed why he spoke hardly at all about open government.

Enter Ige, who lists among the action plans for his new administration "creating a process of two-way communication. State government will share information with the public and listen to public concerns and ideas."

To accomplish that, Ige said he would hold weekly news conferences, require Cabinet members to be accessible, hold at least four community meetings a year and look for "appointees who are committed to conducting government affairs in an open manner, responsive to the public."

At his first news conference upon inauguration, Ige noted that he was warned about too broadly promising a news conference every week, adding that he would take the

advice into consideration.

In the Legislature, Ige was not a flag-waving open-government sort of guy, but he was instrumental in some of the basic reforms to the state Senate rules that put the daily business of the Legislature, including texts of bills and committee testimony, onto the Internet.

During the campaign, Ige was quick to criticize Abercrombie, who questioned the need for a bill that would put more state board and commission members under the Ethics Commission public reporting laws.

"If I were governor, I would have signed this bill immediately because I believe in an open government that is held accountable," Ige said earlier this year.

There is a lot Ige can do quickly to speed up transparency in his administration and leave a legacy of openness.

First, he needs to search for state lawyers who can champion open government and realize that in the end, the client they serve is the public and not a fumbling bureaucrat with dirty laundry.

Chris Conybeare, a West Oahu university professor and chairman of Media Council Hawaii, urges Ige to lead the state toward more openness.

"The open records laws and public meetings laws need to be completely revamped because there are a number of loopholes and dodges now used by government agencies and commissions to prevent the public from knowing what is going on," Conybeare said in an interview. "We welcome (that) he is saying these things and we look forward to him implementing these ideas."

As for news conferences, news about Hawaii's governor has gone from the era of Gov. John A. Burns, where reporters simply loitered about the press secretary's office, hoping the governor would stop by and say something, to the elaborately scripted pageants staged by Gov. Linda Lingle.

Former Gov. George Ariyoshi, Ige's biggest supporter, put up with all manner of goofy questions from the press and took extra steps to be available to discuss public issues.

Govs. John Waihee and Ben Cayetano were always available, and Waihee took the extra effort to start the process of reforming state open record laws.

Now in a digital age, the very description of what is a record and what is produced by querying a database make public law a much more complex effort.

If Ige is searching for a place to stand in the debate, it is in the sunshine.

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