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Improve access to Legislature

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Nov26, 2010

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As technology has advanced, Hawaii's Legislature has made progress through the past decade in providing increased access to the legislative process. However, access has come to mean online without delay or live on television and/or the Internet, and lawmakers have fallen behind the curve. They should heed the call by 18 citizen groups for greater and quicker access in the upcoming session beginning in January.

The groups, ranging in ideology from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action to the conservative Grassroot Institute, have sent letters through Common Cause Hawaii to legislators to complain that "ordinary citizens" have been unable to "keep up with what is happening in the state Capitol if they cannot be there regularly in person."

In recent years, bills have been posted in full on the Legislature's website -- www.capitol.hawaii.gov -- but often they have not reflected most-recent changes. In some cases, the groups point out, "major changes are made to large and complicated bills, and citizens do not get the opportunity to examine the amendments in depth" before further action is taken.

Worse yet, the groups complain that in some cases a proposed amendment is available only in hard copy at a Capitol office, even though it is made immediately available at the end of a hearing. That means it was prepared in advance of the testimony so could have been posted online. Too often, the Legislature's website provides the wording of a bill on its way to the House or Senate floor without including changes that have been made in committee, even though immediate posting of the changed bill was easily possible.

While the Senate gives three days notice before a committee meeting to submit testimony before a committee, the House gives only two days. The groups, which often testify at the Capitol, understandably ask for more lead time in both chambers to prepare meaningful comments, limited as the legislative calendar is required.

Legislators have yet to make full use of video that is available to telecast selected hearings through the four-channel Capitol TV or on the Internet. However, only the Senate makes telecasts available online. Both chambers should expand such coverage for the majority of the public that has no opportunity to observe them in person. If the increased cost is prohibitive, the groups ask in the letters that the hearings be broadcast in audio.

Legislative leadership should be able to make the improvements requested by the groups without raising costs. In most cases, they could be accomplished merely by making public access a higher priority and making more use of video machinery that is available. And any concerns over manpower could quickly be overcome by inspired use of volunteers or interns from, say, political science classes or tech-communications programs. Civic engagement and government transparency toward better law-making, after all, are the very important goals here.

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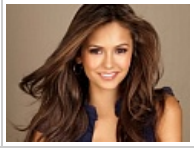
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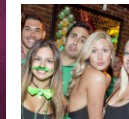


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- Guest Columns
- Off the News
- Letters to the Editor
- Name in the News
- On Politics
- Kauakūalahale

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