

Improved state website, app make it easier to follow the campaign money

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The state Campaign Spending Commission is making it easier to follow the money in political campaigns with a greatly enhanced website and an app that shows campaign contributions and expenditures in easy-to-understand graphs and charts.

The app, at hawaii.gov/campaign, covers state and county candidates, and shows percentages for individual, family, PAC and political party contributions, in-state versus out-of-state contributions and contributions by ZIP code. Expenditures are also broken down in easy-to-read pie charts.

“We hope that people will go to the site before they vote so they will have a good picture of who they’re voting for,” said Executive Director Kristin Izumi-Nitao.

The charts and graphs will be updated automatically as candidates file their campaign reports. The next reporting deadline for state and county candidates running for office in 2014 or 2016 is Jan. 31.

Another recent upgrade allows the public to select a single campaign contributor and find out how much that contributor gave to each candidate. Previously, that information could be attained only by searching each candidate individually.

The upgrades were done by the commission in partnership with the state Office of Information Management and Technology, the state Information & Communication Services Division, and Socrata, a Seattle-based cloud software company focused exclusively on democratizing access to government data.

The commission unveiled the new tool Thursday at the 2013 Hawaii Digital Government Summit at the Hilton Hawaiian Village on Oahu.

Good-government groups applauded the innovations.

“We’re just delighted they moved forward on this,” said Janet Mason, legislative chairwoman for the Hawaii League of Women Voters. “They are a leader as far as making data open to the public.”

Mason predicted other state agencies will follow suit, thanks to Act 263, Hawaii’s open data initiative, that Gov. Neil Abercrombie signed into law July 3. The law requires Executive Branch departments to make electronic data sets publicly available.

“It makes what is really the public’s data available in an electronic format,” she said.

Common Cause Hawaii is also thrilled with the change.

“The new data visualization app will help citizens review key campaign data more efficiently: Where is campaign money coming from? How much of a candidate’s campaign is funded by family members and special interest?,” said Executive Director Carmille Lim. “The data-visualization format will be less intimidating for the average citizen — with no prior campaign spending data analyzing experience — to understand. Our hope is to see the app utilized more broadly, money in politics conversations become more common and see more informed voters.”

