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## It's time to act to protect elections process

By Jean Aoki, Alani Apio and Nikki Love

The clock is ticking: We are now only months away from the primary and general election, and even sooner than that we may be holding a special Congressional election. But there is a looming problem: Will we be ready to actually hold an election?

We normally take for granted that the elections will just happen, but it's become painfully clear that Hawai'i is not ready for smooth elections in 2010.

Several months ago, Hawai'i's Chief Election Officer Kevin Cronin announced that his office does not have the resources it needs to fund critical permanent and seasonal positions, contracts, basic operations and purchase necessary supplies.

In various venues, both the administration and Legislature refused to provide additional funds for the Office of Elections.

The discussion then became bigger than just funding: Elected officials stated they had little confidence in Cronin, and county clerks voiced their dissatisfaction with his collaboration efforts in preparing for 2010.

About two weeks ago, Cronin released a new plan that would close 97 precincts (out of a total of 339 statewide) — a dramatic cut that would send many voters to new, possibly less convenient locations to vote.

That same day, Cronin announced his resignation effective Dec. 31, leaving the Office of Elections leaderless.

Meanwhile, complicating all of this, the Office of Elections is enmeshed in several legal battles regarding the procurement of voting machines and the security of transmission of votes from the Neighbor Islands. The office has been ordered to adopt new administrative rules, putting the procurement of voting machines on hold until those rules are finalized.

In sum: It's a mess, and adequate time to resolve this situation is quickly disappearing. The impending resignation of Rep. Neil Abercrombie will trigger a special election, making it even more urgent to get these problems resolved. We have been watching this unfold and, in our best estimation, we believe the following actions need to be taken ASAP.

- The Elections Commission needs to act swiftly to appoint an interim elections chief. We also believe the commission should actively lobby the governor and Legislature for resources, and seek feedback and assistance from the community to help pave the way to 2010.
- The administration needs to act now to ensure that the Office of Elections has the proper funding and authorizations to fill the numerous critical permanent and seasonal positions. Cronin's latest plan proposes using federal Help America Vote Act funds to fill positions. The administration should authorize that to be done immediately.
- Legislators need to get serious about elections and push for real solutions now and for the future. For one, the Legislature can help the elections budget by simply lifting the existing budget provisions that are restricting how the office can allocate its limited funds.
- Citizens need to speak up about the closing of precincts. Will this discourage voting? Will the



The Elections Commission need to act, and citizens need to speak up, to ensure that the elections will be properly funded.

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Office of Elections have the resources to inform voters about the closed polling places and the alternatives of absentee voting and early walk-in voting? We must voice our concerns now, while there is still some time to plan.

- All of us need to seriously consider the value of our democratic form of government and support the process. Businesses, schools, and community organizations can provide voter registration opportunities and sponsor election forums. Individual citizens must encourage their friends, family, and coworkers to vote and consider taking the bigger step of serving as poll workers or election observers. In 2008 Hawaii was dead last in the nation in voter turnout, and it is everyone's kuleana to change that in 2010.

Elections are the very foundation of our democracy. For many individuals, elections are the only time they give direct input to the government and voice their opinion on what Hawaii's future should look like. With elections just around the corner, let's all work quickly together to ensure that we are ready to count those voices.

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