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Lack of support could doom publicly funded campaigns

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Happy Easter. Now go work on your taxes.

Somewhere in the list of questions to answer is one about whether or not you want to check off a \$3 contribution to the Hawaii Campaign Election Fund.

The fund was created by the 1978 state Constitutional Convention to allow for the partial public funding of campaigns.

The three bucks doesn't raise or lower your taxes or change your chances of being audited, but it does help pay for the campaigns of politicians who agree to limit their campaign spending.

Sen. Les Ihara, who was a delegate to the convention 38 years ago, recalled that it was one of the most intensely debated issues before the delegates.

"It is still important," Ihara said. "David Ige ran with public funding and he's now governor."

The Kapahulu Democrat said he would like to see the fund increased. Then it would pay for more candidates to run, without having to resort to getting money from private interests like developers and lobbyists.

Before that day of clean campaigning can start, however, Hawaii taxpayers are going to have to become more interested in checking that box.

The fund collected a high of almost \$500,000 in 1992. Last year, it picked up only \$162,000, the Campaign Spending Commission reported.

The situation is actually more dire than just waning interest in good government. The commission was forced by the Legislature to dip into that campaign fund to pay its own operating expenses. The move was a tiny part of the crisis budget-balancing done during the last recession, but no new funding has been approved since then.

Kristin Izumi-Nitao, the commission's executive director, said in legislative testimony last week that the commission is operating at an average net deficit of \$524,000.

Noting that "the commission is concerned that revenue is insufficient to sustain commission operations and programs," Izumi-Nitao told legislators that the commission may have to cut back its publicly funded campaign program.

"Of greater concern is that by December 2017, the funds are projected to be near depletion such that we will be unable to run the public-funding program for the 2018 election," Izumi-Nitao warned.

To help the commission, both the House and Senate are moving bills to appropriate the needed \$500,000 to run the commission, but the public funding is supposed to stand on its own.

Tony Baldomero, the commission's associate director, has been working with the League of Women Voters, Common Cause and the state Tax Department to get more publicity for the income tax check-off.

"So far the efforts don't seem to have been fruitful," Baldomero reported.

His office even launched a letter-writing campaign to get TurboTax to change its programming that automatically tells tax filers to not check-off the \$3 for the spending commission.

"We at least got TurboTax to change the wording on its screen about the tax check-off, but the default position is still to not check it," Baldomero said.

The end result is that you still have to pay your taxes and the \$3 check-off remains largely unchecked.

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