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Lawmakers quash gifts bill

A House panel sets aside legislation that would have allowed solicitation of free tickets and trips

By Susan Essoyan

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Apr 01, 2011



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Egy rendkívüli gyógynövény, amely véget vet a hajhullásnak Leleplezték egy

The House Judiciary Committee killed a bill yesterday that would have allowed legislators and state employees to accept free fundraiser tickets from nonprofit organizations as well as trips sponsored by other governments, with no restrictions.

Judiciary Chairman Gilbert Keith-Agaran said he preferred to stick with the law that has been on the books since 1972, which prohibits state employees from soliciting or accepting any gift that can reasonably be inferred as intended to influence or reward them in the performance of their duties.

Keith-Agaran (D, Kahului-Paia) said the law "continues to balance the expectations of constituents and local groups for their legislators to come to meetings, events and fundraising dinners and the concerns of legislative watchdogs about lobbyist influence."

"I looked at the existing language of the statute and the opinions, and I think the statute is fairly flexible," he said. "I thought it was probably better to leave things as they are."

The Ethics Commission has interpreted the law to allow small "gifts of aloha," such as lei and meals valued under \$25. State employees are allowed to accept costlier invitations and trips as long as there is a bona fide state purpose.

Senate Bill 671, HD 1, would have dramatically altered the law by carving out exceptions for state employees to solicit and accept unlimited fundraiser tickets from nonprofit organizations and invitations, even if those gifts were intended to influence or reward them. It also opened the door to unrestricted gifts from other governments. State employees would have had to report those gifts annually.

The Ethics Commission opposed changing the law. The proposed bill also provoked an outcry from civic groups who expressed relief yesterday at its demise.

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"We heard from a lot of citizens that were upset about this bill, and we're glad that the committee heard that," said Nikki Love, executive director of Common Cause Hawaii.

Barbara Polk, legislative chairwoman for Americans for Democratic Action/Hawaii, said, "We're really happy that Rep. Keith-Agaran understood the issue and deferred the bill."

Senate Bill 671 was first introduced in an effort to strengthen disclosure requirements for lobbyists but was gutted and rewritten a few times.

The most recent draft was authored by House Majority Leader Blake Oshiro (D, Ha lawa-Aiea).

"I just thought it was something worthy of discussion because I think so many questions and confusion has arisen over this in the last few months," Oshiro said after the meeting, where he agreed to defer the bill. "If legislators and the Judiciary chair feel things are clear enough, then I'm fine."

The push to change the law came after the Ethics Commission advised legislators that they should not accept \$200 tickets from lobbyists to attend the Hawaii Institute for Public Affairs annual dinner. Just three legislators attended the dinner on Feb. 24, down from more than 40 last year, according to Bill Kaneko, executive director of the institute, who pushed to loosen the law.

"For many nonprofits an annual fundraising dinner or charitable event is an opportunity to educate legislators about the work we do and the issues we face," Kaneko testified.

Keith-Agaran said the proposed legislation had been blown out of proportion.

"This is one of those issues that has been inflated," he said, adding that "all we got was 30 calls" after an editorial Wednesday urged readers to call his office to oppose the bill.

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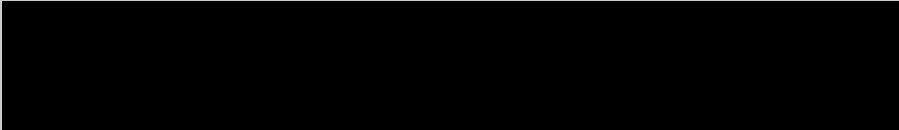
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