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## Looser ethics bill for legislators will make influence-

# peddling easier

By Cynthia Oi

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Mar 24, 2011



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Among the arguments lawmakers use to justify their desire for an official palm-greasing policy, and the pending bill that would sanction freebies, is their need to be educated and their drawing power at fundraising parties and receptions.

First, let's take the education part.

The premise for inviting members of the House and Senate to sit through three-course dinners at some Waikiki hotel ballroom is to provide an opportunity for them to acquire knowledge about the objectives and operations of organizations that are paying for their plates of opakapaka with beurre blanc.

The supposition here is that legislators are so isolated at the state Capitol that they are unaware of the workings of groups as well known as Aloha United Way. Nor of the interests and functions of the Hawaii Institute for Public Affairs, which may not be as familiar to the hoi polloi as A UW, but certainly is recognized in political circles, with key members connected to Neil Abercrombie's gubernatorial campaign.

Educating legislators doesn't require free-flowing food and liquor under flattering lights with piano music in the background.

The appropriate atmosphere would be a free-flowing discussion in a Capitol meeting room where attention is focused on information and details. If Hawaii's culture of hospitality need be observed, a \$7.95 Don Quijote bento or a box of Happy Days dim sum would serve the purpose without getting close to the \$200 per lawmaker maximum payola limit that Senate Bill 671, HD1 would allow for "gifts" of "money, service (and) goods."

Right now, the law is simple. It bans legislators and employees from soliciting and accepting gifts that can reasonably be inferred as intended to influence or reward them for the performance of their duties. The Ethics Commission says lawmakers can receive small items, such as cookies and flowers valued under \$25.

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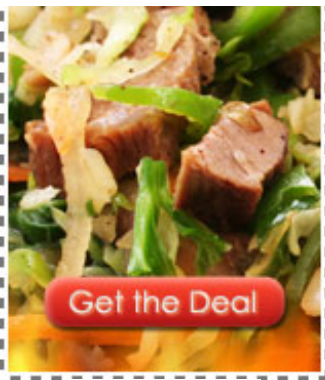
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Lawmakers want more. They want to be able to take trips paid for by other governments with no restrictions. They also want free tickets to fundraisers. While this would seem to interfere with the purpose of a fundraiser, it leads to the second argument: legislative star quality.

If a legislator attends an event, the hosts can use the legislator's presence to lure others to pay up. No doubt many business and industry representatives, lobbyists and the like would shell out for a chance to glad-hand and chat up politicians in an attempt to win them over. That elected officials would let themselves be used this way teeters on the brink of prostitution.

One more argument legislators make in trying to win favor for the so-called ethics bill is that as a trade-off, they will 'fess up to voters about who gave them what. Transparency is little consolation when the deed is already done

Lawmakers have framed the measure around charitable groups and nonprofit organizations, which conveys a benign character when many such groups are merely the arms of a for-profit or industry body.

If the bill becomes law, it delivers another way for moneyed and special interests to expand their influence, just as campaign contributions can push power from the people.

Cynthia Oi can be reached at coi@staradvertiser.com.

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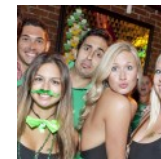


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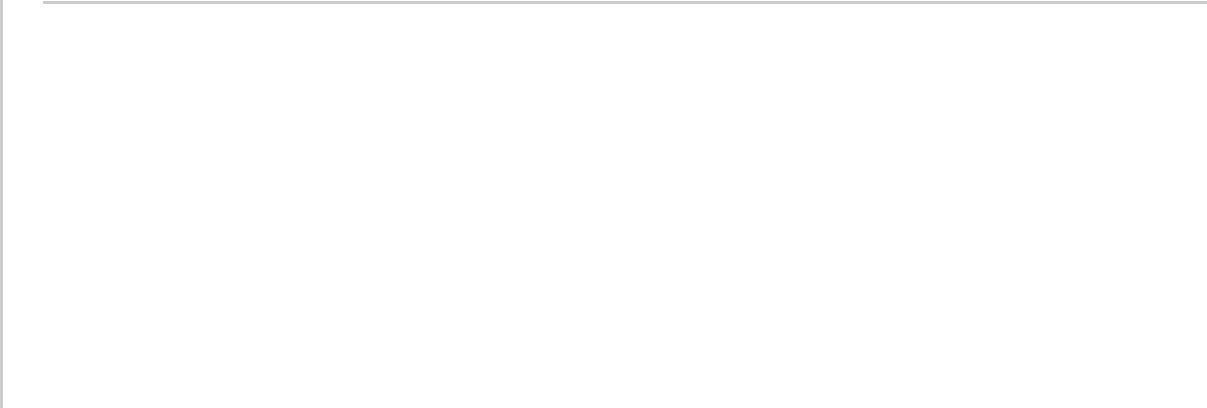
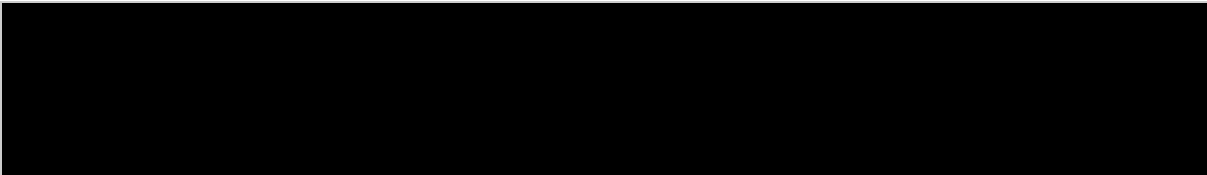
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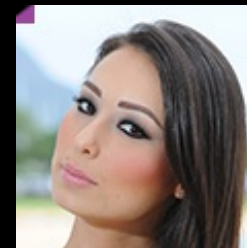
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