

## COMMUNITY VOICE

# Make Live Videoconference Testimony a Reality For Neighbor Islands

Legislators should make it possible for citizens beyond Oahu to take part in the business of the state.

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As the committee votes were being cast during the second day of the Carleton Ching confirmation hearing for the position of chairperson of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, Sen. Sam Slom offered an interesting insight from the position of those willing to accept the nominee. After equating the two-day hearing to a “public colonoscopy,” Slom went on to claim, “We should be afraid of [ISIS \(The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria\)](#) and North Korea and not Mr. Ching.”

The unusually long hearing was sparked by significant public opposition — more than 8,000 voters signed a petition or submitted written testimony that [raised questions](#) about Ching’s employment as a lobbyist for Castle & Cooke, a prominent land developer. However, many of those who were present at the hearing, a virtual “Who’s Who” in Hawaii’s building industry, offered oral testimony in support of Ching’s confirmation.

Alongside the governor, supporters maintained a position that often chided both the Senate Water and Land Committee and the opposition as a whole. It didn’t take long for the local media to highlight that most of the oral testimony was leaning in support of the nominee. I couldn’t help but [wonder](#) if this ratio of support would have remained intact had the hearing been held on a weekend and/or included live videoconference testimony from the neighbor islands.



*Sen Laura Thielen, right, chair of the Senate Water and Land Committee, and Sen. Maile Shimabukuro listen to testimony during the Ching hearing. Neighbor island voices, unfortunately, were silent, as testimony by live videoconference isn't permitted in state legislative hearings.*

Both the House and Senate had introduced bills which addressed some of these concerns, but neither measure survived the session. [HB1054](#), introduced by Rep. Nicole Lowen, called for a pilot project to utilize existing equipment in Hawaii County to enable audio or live video testimony at the Capitol, while Sen. Lorraine Inouye's [SB523](#) proposed to convene a statewide fair access commission to implement telecommunications for live testimony for all neighbor islands.

For now, though, it appears we will have to wait until the legislative session opens in 2016 to take up live videoconferencing again. Although both bills passed their respective first committees, neither was scheduled for a second hearing. It is interesting to note that although these bills acknowledged the geographic difficulties faced by both neighbor island and rural Oahu residents, neither addressed the equally important issue of scheduling hearings. Even for residents living on Oahu, taking time off of work to attend a hearing is frequently not an option. Holding significant hearings such as this on a weekend, or at least after business hours, would offer the public an opportunity to

attend hearings without compromising their employment.

As evidenced by the public response to Ching's nomination, there is a growing consensus that we must change the nature of politics in Hawaii if we are to move forward. Ethical issues relating to public access, good government, and voter participation are the undercurrent of our political system. No matter which side of an issue you are on, it is beholden upon each of us to act on those beliefs and participate in the political process as much as possible.

Taking full advantage of current technology seems the obvious answer. Perhaps there is some truth in Slom's comparison of this hearing to a colonoscopy. It was certainly an invasive and uncomfortable procedure, but nonetheless necessary.

However, there is a clear distinction to be made between a medical operation and the business of government, and I would prefer to call this hearing "democracy." As for Slom's suggestion that we should not be afraid of the nominee in question and instead worry about terrorism, I for one am much more concerned with the public's voice being silenced by corporate and special interest donations than I am of any global threat.

To maintain a status quo of marginalizing legitimate concerns undermines the public trust and is a far greater threat to our system of government than any "enemy" we could possibly imagine. True courage is to be found in open, frank dialogue, and critical analysis of the problems and issues that face all sides.

Making sure we capitalize on methods that facilitate such discussion is paramount. Rapid advances in communication technology present us with a unique opportunity to move forward collectively. If politicians continue to be conflicted by which promises are more important — the ones made to the public or the ones made to friends in high places — then what better way to remind them of their commitment to the residents of Hawaii than to allow for as many voices as possible to be heard.

Had live videoconference technology already been in place, or had this hearing not been held when most island residents were at work, perhaps the governor wouldn't have had to wait until the 11th hour to withdraw Ching's nomination. The collective voice of our island would have been made abundantly loud and clear.

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## About the Author



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Robert Fread is an undergraduate student who is majoring in Political Science and Philosophy at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He has lived in the Koolauloa region of Oahu since 2002 and is currently an intern with Common Cause Hawaii.

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Excellent points..Slom is embarrassingly way off base in his comments.

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**Mary Fread** · Retired at Home Sweet Home

I am proud of my son and his comments.

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**Raina Whiting** · Hawaiian Ocean View, Hawaii

FYI, the Senate has a video testimony pilot program.

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**Shannon Rudolph**

And neighbor islanders should get to testify first, instead of the lobbyists who live in the hallways.

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**Tokumana Aki**

Nice Robert. Political Science and Philosophy can be a good combination for a good human being.

We live on islands that many consider their country and not a legitimate state and no matter what US citizens say to us. Many of us will never change our minds about our country and it is about time these fake politicians understand that their is more to the Kingdom of Hawaii than illegal land barons, bankers, and carpetbaggers manipulating the votes, the politicians, and the laws in the fake state of Hawaii.

We have a two party system and a whiner takes all. We do not have a parliamentary sys... See More

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