



March 16, 2016 | 🌤️ 79° | 🚗 Check Traffic

Hawaii News

Opposition stalls vote on ethics bill

By [Susan Essoyan](#)

March 23, 2011

After hearing strong opposition, the House Judiciary Committee delayed a decision on a bill to allow state employees, including lawmakers, to accept free tickets to nonprofit fundraisers and even foreign junkets without restrictions.

"I think I need a little more time to work on the language after hearing some of the comments," committee Chairman Gil Keith-Agaran said after a hearing yesterday on [Senate Bill 671 HD 1](#). The committee put off decision-making until March 31.

The bill would dramatically alter Hawaii's ethics law, which prohibits state employees from accepting any gift that can reasonably be inferred as intended to influence or reward them in the performance of their duties. It would create exemptions allowing them to accept free fundraiser tickets from nonprofit organizations, including chambers of commerce and labor unions, as well trips sponsored by other governments. They would have to report such gifts annually, but no limit would be imposed on the value of the gift.

Testimony ran strongly against the measure, with the Ethics Commission speaking out against it as well as civic groups, including Common Cause Hawaii, Americans for Democratic Action/Hawaii and the League of Women Voters of Hawaii, and numerous individuals.

"There are countless (nonprofit) organizations and entities with significant interest in legislation and government action," said Common Cause Hawaii Executive Director Nikki Love. "Gifts from these entities would all be allowed even if it were completely obvious that the gift was intended to influence or reward the legislator or state

employee."

The move to open up the gift law came after the Ethics Commission recently advised legislators that they could not accept \$200 tickets as gifts from lobbyists to attend the Hawaii Institute of Public Affairs dinner. Bill Kaneko, the institute's president, said only three legislators attended this year's fundraising dinner, compared with more than 40 last year.

House Majority Leader Blake Oshiro, who wrote the current draft of the bill, expressed frustration that legislators aren't sure now what invitations they are allowed to accept.

"We've not touched this gift law for 39 years," Oshiro said. "All of a sudden I'm getting a flurry of inquiries from members asking, Should I go, should I not go?"

The commission has allowed traditional "gifts of aloha," such as lei or boxes of manapua and meals valued at less than \$25. State employees may accept more valuable gifts, as long as there is a reasonable state benefit in their attending the event, said Leslie Kondo, the commission's executive director.

The Hawaii Institute of Public Affairs, the American Cancer Society Hawaii Pacific Inc. and Lanakila Pacific supported the bill, saying that inviting legislators to their events helps them understand their nonprofit missions.