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Panel must assure openness in redrawing voter

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



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The Hawaii Reapportionment Commission got off to a rocky start in its early weeks. The eight members, evenly divided between Democratic and Republican appointees, were unable even to agree on whom to appoint to its ninth member slot, forcing the state Supreme Court to finish constituting the panel on Friday.

That's not exactly a record that inspires confidence that the commission can rise above partisan fights and keep the public interest in the forefront.

No wonder three citizen groups sounded the alarm when the commission voted to give itself a wide berth on public notification for its meetings.

This week the League of Women Voters of Hawaii, Common Cause Hawaii and Americans for Democratic Action followed their well-founded concern with a letter protesting the commission's decision to require only three days' public notice for its meetings rather than the six required under the state Sunshine Law.

In addition, the grassroots organizations also objected to another commission rule of order, in which members of the public would have to make a request to testify 48 hours in advance of a meeting.

Dylan Nonaka, the acting commission chairman, said that the panel has an advisory from the state attorney general that, because of its limited time frame, the reapportionment commission is not bound by Sunshine Law rules.

He added that the commission needed looser restrictions especially in its formative phase, during which staff is hired and frequent meetings needed to be called, but gave assurances that the panel would voluntarily follow the Sunshine Law as often as possible, and would accept testimony given on the spur of the moment by anyone showing up at a meeting.

That expression of resolve is fine, but there's no reason the group shouldn't put it in writing. With the appointment retired judge Victoria Marks as the final commission member, the organizational work is done and there should be no expectation of



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member, the organizational work is done and there should be no expectation of meetings being called without full notice going forward. If the commission worries that some unforeseen problem should arise forcing the commission to convene more quickly, the panel can adopt rules allowing waivers under such emergencies.

"We believe that over the coming months there will be strong interest by the public in the commission's work, and we hope that you will make transparency and public input a high priority as you carry out your work," the citizen groups' letter reads.

We agree.

The Reapportionment Commission is reshaping an important aspect of how government works in Hawaii by redrawing district lines. That's often contentious business — as foreshadowed by the panel's bickering over its lone appointment.

The voters need to see that a commitment to openness is the rule, in writing, rather than the exception. Promises are nice statements of good intentions. But in such a political context, with so much at stake, good intentions are not enough.

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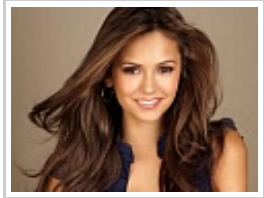
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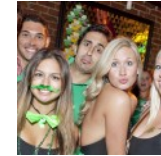
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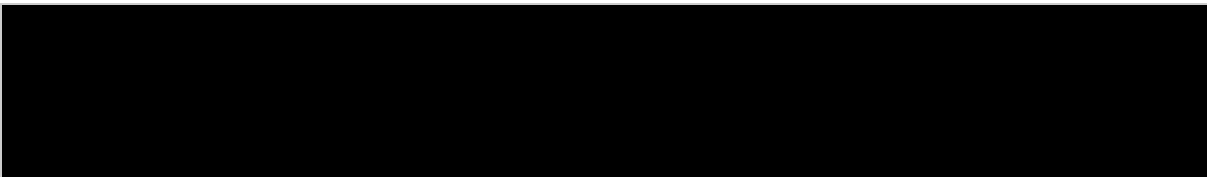
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