

Push for Legislative video conferences shows lackluster use

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HONOLULU - With the 2016 legislative session finishing last Thursday, some lawmakers want to highlight a sorely under-used tool that could help get more people involved in the governmental process.

That tool is video conferencing, a way for Hawai'i residents to remotely submit realtime testimony using a computer, live camera and internet connection.

Considering the transportation costs and time commitment it takes for a neighbor island resident to get to the State Capitol in Honolulu, some say the tool has plenty of potential.

"It's a fantastic idea," said Anna-Lisa Okoye, Chief Operating Officer of the non-profit Kohala Center on the Big Island. Last year, she came to Oahu to testify on a bill that would impact farmers and merchants in her community. But she said the 48-hour notice given for legislative hearings makes getting involved in the process from a neighbor island even more difficult.

"There's very little notice for when the hearings come out," Okoye said. "So if you do want to come over from a neighbor island and provide testimony, you're kind of making travel arrangements in a really tight time frame. Not to mention it's expensive and it takes up an entire day."

That sentiment was echoed by State House Representative Nicole Lowen. She has tried to pass bills to create a universal video conference system in the Legislature for several sessions.

"The technology is there," said Rep. Lowen. "We are absolutely capable of doing it, and we are kind of running out of excuses for not providing this opportunity to the people."

The main reason her attempts have not transpired is because a video conference pilot project already exists in the Legislature, on the Senate side.

Senate leadership began using the video conference system in 2013. Using funds within their operating budget to hardwire conference room 414 with big screen televisions and cameras.

They also established a website instructing residents wanting to testify remotely how to access the system.

"The Senate has put in place the ability for it to happen," said State Senator Kalani English, who represents parts of Maui, Moloka'i Lana'i and Kaho'olawe. "The more people start to use it, the more we'll start expanding it."

So this past session, the House followed suit. They began their own pilot project using a mobile video conference unit that can operate in any hearing room.

So far, the use of both systems has been dismal.

According to the Senate Clerk's Office a total of 44 testimonies have been recorded using their system over the past four sessions.

2013 - 6 testimonies

2014 - 25 testimonies

2015 - 7 testimonies

2016 - 6 testimonies

Part of the reason is that only a select few committees have used the resource. For the 2016 session the Senate Economic Development, Environment and Technology Committee (EET) used the capabilities, at the request of the committees chairs.

Other committees have used it in the past three sessions, such as Agriculture, Education and Technology Committees, but it has not had a consistent use.

On the House side only one committee has used their mobile unit, the Ocean Marine Resources and Hawaiian Affairs Committee.

"Part of what we've heard in the past is we have these pilot projects and not a lot of people have used them," said Rep. Lowen. "But I think there's kind of a critical mass of making it available and having the understanding out there that it is available. And then people will start catching on."

She believes that there should be uniformity in the system, to make one overall program that is used by the entire Legislature.

"I think there needs to be some discussion and some agreement on how to proceed and get everyone on board with what the system will look like. How we can make it user-friendly, and have some consistency between House and Senate," said Rep. Lowen.

"It'll become too cumbersome," Senator English said in response to the idea of a universal system. "Instead of trying to set-up one big system across the whole of the state, people can follow from our experiments and from our experience. And build policies off of that. So, I think that would be a better route to go."

Currently both systems use the Go-To-Meeting software, which requires a \$2,000 a year license.

Neither lawmaker knew the overall cost of the systems.

Senator English said that they have recently expanded the video conference abilities to several other conference rooms.

"I think it should be something that is encouraged and expanded and publicized so people are aware of it," said Okoye.

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