

POLITICS

Senate Panel Nixes Proposal To Ease Campaign-To-Campaign Donations

Hawaii candidates will not be able to give their campaign money directly to other campaigns, but they can still buy tickets to other politicians' fundraisers.

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A bill moving through the Hawaii Legislature retains a loophole in state law that allows elected officials to use their campaign money to buy up to two tickets to another politician's fundraiser.

But a proposal to allow direct contributions from one campaign to another has been cut from the current version of [House Bill 2156](#).

The measure was amended last week by the Senate Judiciary and Labor Committee and [now awaits a hearing](#) in Senate Ways and Means on Wednesday.

The idea to allow direct campaign-to-campaign donations was opposed by good government groups and others who argued that the language amounted [to legalized vote buying](#).



Hawaii Campaign Spending Commission Executive Director Kristin Izumi-Nitao wants to ensure that her office is funded as called for in the state Constitution.

Common Cause Hawaii and the League of Women Voters of Hawaii told senators that HB 2156 had been “radically altered” in the House from its original purpose, which was to appropriate funding for the state [Campaign Spending Commission](#) rather than continue the practice of drawing on excess funds from the [Hawaii Election Campaign Fund](#).

The fund is used to help publicly fund some campaigns.

The league’s Janet Mason said the fund should not be raided to pay for the commission’s expenses. The commission has been operating at a deficit averaging \$524,000 for the past seven years. That’s partly because it is dependent on a \$3 check-off box in state tax returns.

But it was the transferring of campaign funds to other campaigns [that most upset several testifiers](#).



From left, state Sen. Maile Shimabukuro, the League of Women Voters' Janet Mason and Common Cause Hawaii's Carmille Lim at a Civil Beat forum on good government this March.

"I do not think the bill fosters democracy," Jennifer Swearingen testified. "This bill make it clearly more difficult for incumbents to be unseated. While this may be a good career move for those holding office, it certainly does not help the state of Hawaii to have 'government of the people, by the people, for the people.'"

Said Lynne Matusow: "What a disgrace. If I donate to a candidate, I want my hard-earned cash to be used for that candidate's campaign. No one else's. If not, return it to me. It is unethical, it is wrong."

Kristin Izumi-Nitao, the Campaign Spending Commission's executive director, said the section of the bill pertaining to transferring funds "goes against public policy already established under law."

Izumi-Nitao, however, supported sections in the bill that would help fund her office as stipulated by the [Hawaii Constitution](#). HB 2156 now calls for appropriating \$495,506

out of the state's general fund for fiscal year 2016-2017 for the commission's operating expenses, including staff salaries.



State Sen. Gil Keith-Agaran's Judiciary and Labor committee amended House Bill 2156.

The [bill still allows](#) for donating campaign funds to public schools, public libraries and student scholarships. The latest version of the legislation adds private schools.

Candidates may also use their campaign money to pay for membership in civic clubs and community groups, and buy protocol gifts.

If a candidate dies, his or her campaign may donate funds “to any community service, educational, youth, recreational, charitable, scientific, or literary organization.”

The campaign can also return the money to contributors. Any funds not redistributed would be deposited in the Hawaii Election Campaign Fund.

HB 2156 passed Senate Judiciary and Labor with six “aye” votes and one “aye” with reservations, which was cast by Sen. Laura Thielen.

Republican Sen. Sam Slom, one of the “aye” votes, commented that HB 2156 was a

“really bad bill as drafted” and expressed satisfaction that the section on fundraising tickets was reinstated. He did not comment on other aspects of the legislation.

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About the Author



CIVIL BEAT STAFF

Chad Blair [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [RSS](#)

Chad Blair is a reporter for Civil Beat. You can reach him by email at cblair@civilbeat.com or follow him on Twitter at [@chadblairCB](https://twitter.com/chadblairCB).

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