

## Shine a light on political finances - Hawaii News - Honolulu

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Sunshine Week, which is being observed this week across the nation, raises the profile of a critical aspect of American democracy: the right to information about, and access to, government officials and the "people's business" that they handle.

It's an issue that often is overlooked until a problem crops up, a conflict that perhaps could have been avoided had there been more information available to the public. That's why when opportunities arise to clear away some of the fog that so often obscures the workings of government, citizens should take them.

The public has such a chance this legislative session. Two measures in particular deserve support, one that would improve the transparency of campaign fundraising and expenditures, and a second that would release more information about the financial interests of politicians early enough to be really useful.

Here are some of the details of the bills, which passed the House and will next get the attention of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

» House Bill 1147 is aimed at expanding the information available about the money raised and spent in the political sphere and make such reports searchable online on the Campaign Spending Commission website.

Among the most important elements is a new requirement for noncandidate committees (sometimes called political action committees, or PACs) to make more specific disclosures in their political advertisements. They would have to identify top contributors in their ads, so that the public associates the message only with the front organization and not with the monied interests behind it.

It would also make explicit who in the PACs is authorizing advertisements or other communications and clarify the source of the funding.

» HB 1132 would ensure that the public has all the financial facts about officials before crucial lawmaking or other government decisions already have been made.

Specifically, the measure would require state elected officials and a wide range of appointed officials, including Cabinet members and other department administrators, to file a statement disclosing their financial interests between Jan. 1 and Jan. 31 each year.

This becomes especially important during the lawmaking session, when it's critical to know the interests of legislators and government officials who are advocating for new laws while there's still time for that

information to be made public.

Among the primary supporters of both bills is Common Cause Hawaii. The group's executive director, Carmille Lim, spoke in favor of the legislation at its House hearings, underscoring the importance of reining in campaign finance, even in the era of a U.S. Supreme Court that wants to let money flow with few fetters as a form of political speech.

"While we may not be able to completely eliminate the influence of 'big money' in politics, we believe that improving the way campaign contributions and expenditures are reported, will help voters identify the source of campaign money," Lim said.

We agree with that goal. While it's true that money is power, so is knowledge. Where government by the people is concerned, the people must let the sun shine in.

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