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This could be the year that all-mail voting is approved

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Sometimes, even in the Legislature, you just can't argue against the overwhelming weight of common sense.

Every election, more and more Hawaii voters have been mailing in an absentee ballot. Two years ago, it was a majority of voters in both primary and general elections dropping their ballots in the mail.

Now chugging through the Legislature is House Bill 1653, which would slowly make it state law that elections in Hawaii would be conducted by mail.

The idea has been a legislative perennial, but support for the bill is growing among both legislators and public interest groups.

The League of Women Voters, which has been supporting voting by mail since 1999, is again plugging away.

"Please secure this important opportunity for Hawaii voters and save money by doing so," said Janet Mason, co-chairwoman of the League's legislative committee, in prepared testimony.

Switching over to an all-mail ballot is estimated to cost an extra \$375,000 for a one-time expenditure to set up a new computer system, according to state elections officials. But, the new program is estimated to save \$800,000 every election cycle, showing it is possible for government to make a return on investment.

Rep. Takashi Ohno, one of the leaders of the Future Caucus, composed of millennial-generation political leaders, added that the plan is to start small, with Kauai going all-mail in 2018, followed by Maui and Hawaii County in 2020, then Oahu in 2022.

“This is the trend where people are headed and the cost for operating the present system is enormous,” Ohno, a Liliha Democrat, said in an interview.

There is an unusually large amount of agreement on the need to go to all-mail ballots among Hawaii’s government bureaucracies.

The counties, for instance, which run the elections with the state, have in the past said they liked the idea, but offered much worry. This year, however, testimony from all four counties was unanimous in saying the time has come.

Without delivering the convenience that many voters want, the current voting system still requires voters to ask for an absentee ballot or physically report to either a walk-in absentee center or an election-day polling place, said Jade Fountain-Tanigawa, Kauai County Clerk.

“Conducting elections by mail will send a ballot to every properly registered voter and establish a voting process which is as effortless and convenient as reasonably possible,” she said in testimony.

Finally, there is the “it is not if, it is when” argument about a hurricane hitting the state during the August voting period.

Two years ago, voters in Puna on Hawaii island were blocked from voting in person because of August’s Hurricane Iselle. That was followed by the electoral chaos about holding a special election, how to hold it, where to hold it and how long to hold it, showing that if everyone had voted by mail there would have been no questions to answer.

Governmental common sense may be an oxymoron, but it still makes sense.

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