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By TOM CALLIS Hawaii Tribune-Herald

HILO — Two bills aimed at making it easier to vote will head into conference committees today at the state Legislature.

The legislation would allow residents to automatically register to vote when applying or renewing a driver's license and would start a vote-by-mail program. The House and Senate each have passed versions of the bills. The committee will be tasked with working out the differences.

The registration measure, House Bill 401, would give residents the option of registering to vote or updating their voter information while taking care of their license. Rep. Nicole Lowen, D-Kona, is a co-sponsor.

House Bill 1653 in its latest form would require the state Office of Elections to start the vote-by-mail program incrementally. Mail ballots currently are limited to absentee voters.

According to the bill, 56 percent of ballots in the 2014 election were cast through early voting. Mail absentee ballots make up most of those.

Starting in 2018, ballots would be mailed to all voters in a county with a population less than 100,000 and expand to the rest of the state in 2020, the bill says. Kauai County is the only county with a population below that mark.

At least 22 states have vote-by-mail provisions, while three states — Washington, Oregon and Colorado — run their elections entirely through the post, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The League of Women Voters of Hawaii, one of the measures' backers, has been pushing for all-mail voting for 19 years, said Janet Mason, the organization's legislative committee co-chair.

"These things take time," she said. "We do think we are close this year."

The popularity of early absentee voting shows this is something the public wants, Mason said. She said it's not definitive that all-mail voting increases turnout, but it does make it easier to cast a ballot.

The bill says voting machines would be available for people with disabilities at designated voter service centers. County clerks may add locations for accepting ballots.

Ballots would be mailed between 14 and 18 days before an election, according to the bill. They would arrive with pre-paid postage, a secrecy envelop and instructions. Ballot counting could begin as early as 10 days before an election, though the early counts would remain confidential until voting concluded.

Email Tom Callis at tcallis@hawaiiitribune-herald.com.

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