

Editorial | Island Voices

Legislators passed useful bills; rail remains open

By House Speaker Scott Saiki

Posted May 14, 2017

May 14, 2017



DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARADVERTISER.COM

The Hawaii State Legislature closed at the State Capitol on May 4. House Speaker Scott Saiki, right, says the House and Senate recognize the need to convene a special session to resolve the rail issue.

Editor's note: Leaders of the Legislature's two chambers were asked to share their insights on the just-concluded session. Senate President Ron Kouchi declined; House Speaker Scott Saiki provided this commentary.

The heart of a strong, healthy democracy is vigorous debate, conflicting ideas, and ultimately, a coming together for the common good of the people. The 2017 legislative session witnessed that debate on a range of critical issues including poverty relief and income inequality, greater educational opportunities, caring for our kupuna, and protecting Hawaii's people and its small businesses. The Legislature passed a number of bills that did not always get the headlines, but helped make everyday lives better for Hawaii's people and represent unprecedented movement on long-standing issues.

ADVERTISING

REDUCING POVERTY

We established a state earned income tax credit (EITC) for low-income working families, so that our most vulnerable workers can keep more of their take home pay to provide for their families. Advocates have been calling for a state EITC for more than 20 years. The establishment of the EITC represents the Legislature's most consequential work in the last few years to reduce poverty and Hawaii's high cost of living.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Economic barriers should not stand in the way of our future generations' educational advancement. In order to improve college access and affordability, the Legislature created the Hawaii Promise program, which will allow financially-needy students to attend our community colleges tuition-free. We also ensured that no child is denied a school lunch due to their inability to pay, recognizing that student nutrition is a key component to learning.

CARING FOR OUR KUPUNA

To support our senior citizens, lawmakers established the Kupuna Caregivers Program to provide support for community members in obtaining care for elders while remaining in the workforce. Hawaii is the first state to offer a program of this kind, putting us on the forefront of supporting multigenerational families.

SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESSES

Recognizing that it can be difficult to do business in Hawaii, the Legislature sought to assist local small businesses by establishing a pilot program to implement a - preference for veteran, women, and Native-Hawaiian-owned small businesses in competing for state contracts. We are trying to keep more of Hawaii taxpayer dollars going to supporting local small businesses.

CREATING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

In order to incentivize the building of more affordable housing, lawmakers passed a bill which makes it cheaper to build affordable housing units through tax incentives and wage changes. Additionally, we allocated \$25 million for the Rental Housing Trust Fund, \$25 million for the Dwelling Unit Revolving Fund, and \$500 million for additional Hula Mae multifamily programs which will all contribute to more affordable housing stock being built.

ENSURING A HEALTHY HAWAII

Legislators took proactive steps to secure Hawaii's health care system and improve public health. We passed bills that would stabilize Hawaii's hospitals and nursing facilities with the Medicaid sustainability programs, expand family leave, and protect the rights of women by requiring accurate medical information to be provided at health facilities statewide. The Legislature also allocated funding to put more nurses and health services in our public schools.

By no means should the Legislature be doing a victory lap or engaging in self-congratulations. Much work remains to be done.

Sometimes resolving the most difficult issues take longer than the 60-day session allows. Such is the case with how to fund Honolulu's rail project. Although the House and the Senate did not reach agreement on this policy front, we agree on the necessity of completing the rail project and completing it well — with maximum accountability, best results, and the least burden on Hawaii taxpayers.

Like it or not, the state has been thrust into an oversight role of the rail project and the extensive debate that ensued this legislative session is a testament to a strong and healthy democracy in Hawaii. We take our role very seriously because this project will be paid for by generations to come.

The House and Senate recognize the need to convene a special session to resolve the rail issue.

The Legislature's public agreements and disagreements this session reveal that checks and balances, real debate and transparency — all hallmarks of a working democracy — are indeed alive and well at the state Capitol.

Scott Saiki is speaker of the state House of Representatives.

✉ Get the latest news by email [Sign Up](#)