Legislative Challenges

This week, I attended the opening of the 2006 session of the Hawaii State Twenty-Third Legislature. There was lots of ceremony, singing, dancing, flowers, food, and aloha. Outrigger's premier entertainment group, the Society of Seven Las Vegas, entertained the House of Representatives and received a standing ovation. Outrigger's Safety and Emergency Planning Specialist Jerry Dolak and Administrative Assistant Lehua Kala’i were also there, representing OHH PAC, our employee political action committee.

All in all, Hawaii's legislative openings have to be a one-of-a-kind event in politics in the United States, if not in the world.

Senate President Robert Bunda and Speaker of the House Calvin Say gave inspiring, yet serious speeches that set the tone for the next 59 days of legislative deliberations. 2006 is a unique year. For the first time in 14 years, Hawaii's state government is forecasting a major budget surplus—nearly $600 million. It follows a national trend where, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Honolulu Advertiser, 42 of 49 states reporting had revenue collections above economic forecasts during the past year. The Wall Street Journal reports in an article titled "States of Plenty," that New York is anticipating a $2 billion surplus and California will have a whopping $5.2 billion in reserves by the end of the fiscal year. The Golden State is where the lights literally went out just a few years ago.

The Journal adds, "(That's) a lot of underreported economic good news. . . . The Bush tax cuts and the economic expansion that has followed have been a windfall for state coffers."

Speaker Say told his fellow members of the House, "A long line of people is waiting at the State Capitol door with their ideas and proposals (on how to spend Hawaii's surplus)." I'll join that chorus and offer a few comments of my own.

First of all, the state should keep its promises to the people of Hawaii and spend a good deal of the surplus on taking care of the massive, deferred maintenance and repair backlog at Hawaii's public schools, community colleges, and universities. It is estimated that public schools alone need $525 million of work—almost the entire surplus.

The inadequate facilities and deferred maintenance and repair at almost any Hawaii public school are appalling. Heather Harris, an Ewa Beach public school teacher, wrote in the Honolulu Advertiser that her school "has no air-conditioning and . . . the temperature regularly hovers around 90 degrees. Because the windows need to be open all day, I have a quarter-inch of red dirt that blows through daily, covering every surface in the room."

Harris' husband teaches at Waianae Intermediate, where there are "old scratched chalkboards and myriad broken tables and chairs discarded in the corners. Wood is splintering off the cabinets. Last week, the thermometer read 94 degrees."

We, as a community, should be embarrassed and outraged that our school system has been allowed to sink to this condition. Fractured facilities and inadequate infrastructure certainly have to be a major part of the reason Hawaii public school students rank so low in national tests of achievement and proficiency in almost any area.

We now have a chance to change that. Let's do it—and then keep up with annual maintenance and repairs.

It's like an old hotel that has not been renovated for many years. Its employees are discouraged, customers are unhappy, occupancy falls, etc. That's why smart hotel companies set aside a significant portion of their income every year to fund ongoing renovations.
Let’s also think about tax relief for the citizens of Hawaii. Eliminate the General Excise Tax on food, prescription drugs, and health care. That would give important tax breaks to everyone, and it would provide the greatest relief to those with low incomes.

Finally, let’s take care of our existing problems, not only in school facilities, but also in parks and road maintenance, and not commit to any new, ongoing programs. In an election year, it is tempting to do otherwise—to start appealing new programs that will require ongoing funding into the indefinite future. However, I’ve been around long enough to know that an up-cycle is always followed by a down-cycle. Usually the down-cycles are caused by things over which we have no control—a natural disaster, war, terrorism, an international economic crisis, etc.

If we succumb to the temptation to expand government programs and entitlements when the economy is good, when the tough times return, the Legislature inevitably cuts back on many things—usually including school maintenance. At that point, there we go again, cheating our children once more. It’s time we show that we’ve learned from past experience.