

# OFFICE OF INFORMATION PRACTICES

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To: Senate Committee on Public Safety, Intergovernmental,  
and Military Affairs

From: Cheryl Kakazu Park, Director

Date: February 4, 2021, 1:30 p.m.  
Via Videoconference

Re: Testimony on S.B. No. 653  
Relating to Informal Meetings

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this bill, which would allow all members of a county council to jointly attend community meetings or presentations. The Office of Information Practices (“OIP”) **opposes this bill. The Sunshine Law’s guest meeting provision enacted in 2014, and made permanent in 2016, already allows all members of a county council to jointly attend community meetings while continuing to protect the public interest through limited meeting safeguards, which this proposal would essentially strip away and render moot.**

In 2014, county council members expressed concerns that the Sunshine Law did not provide them a workable method to attend community meetings or presentations that any number of council members might want to attend and at which a variety of board topics might be raised, and where it would not be practical to follow a set agenda or take public testimony. Consequently, the Legislature passed H.B. 2139, H.D. 1, S.D. 1, C.D. 1, which was signed into law as Act 221, SLH 2014, and created a new type of limited meeting in section 92-3.1, HRS, that allows

any number of county council members to attend a meeting open to the public as the guest of a board or community group. Under this guest meeting provision, the council's notice of the limited meeting is not required to include an agenda, and unless the hosting community group is itself a Sunshine Law board, there is no requirement to take oral testimony at the meeting. **The Legislature included safeguards**, such as the requirement that no limited meeting of this sort be held outside Hawaii, that only one such meeting per community group per month be held, and that no decisions be made at the meeting. In addition, the videotaping requirement applicable to all limited meetings applies to guest meetings as well, unless waived by OIP. The Legislature included a sunset date of June 30, 2016, for the guest meeting provision.

In 2016, the Legislature passed S.B. 2121, S.D. 1, H.D. 1, C.D. 1, signed into law as Act 056, SLH 2016, which made the guest meeting provision permanent and required each council to report annually to the legislature on the effectiveness and application of the guest meeting provision, including any recommendations or proposed legislation. OIP has not seen this year's annual reports, so OIP does not know whether any county's report recommended the legislation proposed by this bill.

**The permitted interaction proposed by this bill would effectively render the guest meeting safeguards moot by allowing any number of county council members to attend a community meeting without the oversight that the Legislature built into Act 221 in 2014.** At the same time, ironically, this proposal would **limit other boards' ability to use the existing informational meeting permitted interaction to keep abreast of professional developments** relevant to their boards. Because this bill would add a requirement that informational meetings be "open to the public" at the same time

it removes, for council members only, the limitation on the number of board members who can attend an informational meeting together, other boards would still be subject to the limitation on attendance but could no longer send several members to attend a professional conference together as some do under current law, because an event with a registration fee could not be considered “open to the public.”

Without information on county councils’ actual experience using the guest meeting provision and recommendations that will improve the provision for both the councils and the public, OIP respectfully suggests that **the Legislature should not consider broadening the informational meetings permitted interaction to allow full councils to discuss board business outside a Sunshine Law meeting.**

Thank you for considering OIP’s testimony.

THE CIVIL BEAT  
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Senate Committee on Public Safety,  
Intergovernmental, and Military Affairs  
Honorable Clarence K. Nishihara, Chair  
Honorable J. Kalani English, Vice Chair

**RE: Testimony Opposing S.B. 653, Relating to Informal Meetings**  
Hearing: February 4, 2021 at 1:30 p.m.

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Brian Black. I am the Executive Director of the Civil Beat Law Center for the Public Interest, a nonprofit organization whose primary mission concerns solutions that promote governmental transparency. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony **strongly opposing S.B. 653**. This bill should be deferred.

In 2014, the Legislature carefully balanced the ability of county councilmembers to attend community meetings against the “the potential for abuse of the public’s right to know and participate in the policy making process.” 2014 Haw. Sess. Laws Act 221. That balance was codified at HRS § 92-3.1(b). **Councilmembers, however, are not using that existing exemption.**

We now have almost 7 years of experience under Act 221. If that carefully balanced compromise legislation is not meeting the needs of county councils, the councils should be able to specify incidents in which the council members wished to attend an event, but were barred from doing so under Act 221. Every year that these proposals arise, the Law Center has requested more information about any difficulties encountered by councilmembers and offered to assist in tailoring amendments to Act 221 to meet any specific difficulties. No information has been provided, but we make the same offer this year.

County councils do not need more exemptions to attend community meetings. If there are legitimate concerns, only narrow amendments to section 92-3.1(b) are appropriate. But the counties first need to come forward with an explanation for why existing law does not work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Statement Before The  
**SENATE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY, INTERGOVERNMENTAL, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS**  
Thursday, February 4, 2021  
1:30 PM  
Via Videoconference

in consideration of  
**SB 653**  
**RELATING TO THE INFORMAL MEETINGS.**

Ch Chair NISHIHARA, Vice Chair ENGLISH, and Members of the  
Public Safety, Intergovernmental, and Military Affairs Committee

Common Cause Hawaii provides written comments on HB 653, which (1) exempts members of a county council from the limitation on the number of members that may attend an informational meeting or presentation on matters relating to official county council business for purposes of permitted interactions and (2) clarifies that such meetings shall be meetings that are open to the public.

Common Cause Hawaii is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots organization focused on upholding the core values of American democracy through increasing open government and government transparency and accountability.

The Sunshine Law, Hawaii Revised (HRS) Chapter 92, ensures that public policy and decision-making are conducted as openly as possible for the people have the right to know and authority in our democracy.

HRS § 92-2.5(e) limits the number of board members who may attend an “informational meeting or presentation on matters relating to official board business, including a meeting of another entity, legislative hearing, convention, seminar, or community meeting; provided that the meeting or presentation is not specifically and exclusively organized for or directed toward members of the board.” Councilmembers, who are governed by the Sunshine Law, would like to attend certain government meetings, like the State of the State Address, are barred by HRS § 92-2.5(e) from all doing so.

Instead of providing a blanket exemption to HRS § 92-2.5(e) for councilmembers, which may be subject to abuse, it may be more prudent to provide limited carveouts, such as annual executive and/or judiciary addresses, that are also open to the public.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on HB 653. If you have further questions of me, please contact me at [sma@commoncause.org](mailto:sma@commoncause.org).

Very respectfully yours,

Sandy Ma  
Executive Director, Common Cause Hawaii



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SENATE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY, INTERGOVERNMENTAL, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS

Thursday, February 4, 2021, 1:30 pm, Videoconference

SB 653, Relating to Informal Meetings

SB 698, Relating to Community Meetings

**TESTIMONY**

Douglas Meller, Legislative Committee, League of Women Voters of Hawaii

Chair Nishihara and Committee Members:

The League of Women Voters of Hawaii strongly opposes both SB 653 and SB 698. Both bills would exempt council quorums that attended any “informational meeting or presentation” from most Sunshine Law requirements which apply to council meetings.

The Sunshine Law currently requires that county councils conduct the public’s business in public. The law guarantees the public both advance notice and the opportunity to listen to all discussions and decisions by a county council quorum. Either SB 653 or SB 698 would exempt council quorums that attended any “informational meeting or presentation” from most Sunshine Law requirements which apply to council meetings. Under SB 653 or SB 698, when a council quorum attended an “informational meeting or presentation”, no advance public notice of council attendance would be required, no council minutes would be prepared, and the public would not have the right to submit oral testimony to the council. Under SB 653 or SB 698, an “informational meeting or presentation” could include events which charge admission, events which take place on the mainland or a foreign country, multi-day events which include both educational and recreational activities, and private events organized by special interests to influence public opinion and council decisions. Either SB 653 or SB 698 would even allow a council quorum to attend an “informational” event at Disneyland.

If a private special interest group which wished to influence council decisions invited a county council to attend a public “informational meeting or presentation” about pending council matters, either SB 693 or SB 698 would authorize a council quorum to attend and discuss those pending council matters with that private special interest group and with each other. Basically, the Sunshine Law would be “neutered”.

No new legislation is needed to allow a council quorum, or even all council members, to attend a meeting hosted by a community group. Since 2014, the Sunshine Law has authorized a county council quorum to hold a “limited meeting that is open to the public, as the guest of a board or community group holding its own meeting, ...”, provided that the council provides advance public notice, the public can attend the meeting without paying an admission fee or traveling out-of-state, no council voting commitments are made, and council minutes are prepared. These reasonable provisos recognize that private interests seeking county land use approvals, private businesses seeking county contracts, and ad hoc “NIMBY” groups commonly form “community groups” which host “informational meetings and presentations” for the purpose of advocating for or against special interest projects.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony.

**LATE**



Feb. 4, 2021

Sen. Clarence K. Nishihara  
Senate Committee on Public Safety, Intergovernmental and Military Affairs  
State Capitol  
Honolulu, HI 96813

Re: Senate Bill 653

Chairman Nishihara and Committee Members:

Please kill this bill.

For many years, the county councils have come to the Legislature to find ways to meet outside the Sunshine Law. And various attempts have been enacted.

In 2014, lawmakers came up with yet-another amendment to allow council members to meet with community groups with some limitations designed to protect the public's rights, but the county councils have not used it. Now the councils are once again asking for another exemption.

There has been no demonstration by the county councils that the law doesn't work.

We fear that this measure could be used to circumvent the protections for transparency in 92-3.1(b) for limited meetings.

Thank you for your attention,

Stirling Morita  
President  
Hawaii Chapter SPJ