

Participate in the Process

by Senator Will Espero

The 2012 Legislative Session is off to an exciting start. Many ideas will find their way through the maze of legislative hearings this spring. Here's a few of the bills introduced in the Senate:

- provide funding to bring emergency medical services back to the leeward side;
- whether mobile phone companies should be required to give cell phone locations to emergency services to help in finding missing children, youth, and adults;
- allow credit unions to offer raffles to attract and motivate people who don't have a savings account to open one and save regularly;

People too often stand back while the lawmaking process goes on then complain about the laws that passed or the good ideas that didn't pass. "I can't get off from work to testify", some say. Others say, "I'm too shy. I don't want to get up in front of people and speak." You no longer have to show up in person to weigh in on a bill. For many years now, testimony was accepted by fax to the committee chairman's office. Now, thanks to the magic of technology, you can give your input on legislative measures online at www.capitol.hawaii.gov. The legislative website is informative.

With a simple click, you can

- Find who your representative and senator are;
- See the membership of the different House and Senate committees;
- See all bills and resolutions introduced in the current biennium;
- See what hearings are scheduled and what bills are being heard;
- See committee reports that summarize testimony on bills;
- Check the broadcast schedule for hearings and daily sessions of the House and Senate; or
- See what bills will be voted on by the entire House or Senate that day.

For example, suppose you are concerned about the huge effect that plastic shopping bags have on our landfills and the hazard it poses to sea creatures. You hear that House Bill (HB) 1828 was introduced by Speaker of the House Calvin Say, and you want to know how that bill is going. Go to the website www.capitol.hawaii.gov. In the top left box, "Bill Status/Measure Status", type in "HB 1828" and click "go". The website will take you to the page for HB 1828.

The webpage for HB 1828 tells you the title, "Single-use Plastic Checkout Bags; Tax". The bill description is that customers pay a tax on each plastic bag distributed at store check-outs. "Companion" tells you the number of the identical Senate bill if one was introduced; in this case, there was no companion. "Current Referral" identifies the House committees to which the bill was sent for possible hearing. The most recent status of the bill is shown just under that. Referred to the House Energy and Environmental Protection (EEP) Committee, it was heard on January 26 at 10:00 in conference room 325. After listening to testimony on the bill during the hearing, the committee deferred the bill, meaning it decided that the bill should not go any further in the legislative process.

You can testify online via the www.capitol.hawaii.gov website. After you've found a bill you want to give input on, look on the website to see if it is being heard. If the bill is scheduled for a hearing, click on the "Submit Testimony" icon. It will take you to the testimony page. In the "Enter a measure" box, type in the bill number. The page will identify the hearing. If that is the hearing you

want to testify for, fill in the testifier information and upload a file of your testimony. Click on the "Submit" button and you're all set. Keep in mind our deadlines – you must submit your testimony no later than 24 hours before the hearing.

Bills can be heard in more than one committee. Check the referrals. Committees are identified by three letter abbreviations. For HB 1828, the referral is "EEP, ERB, FIN". This means the bill must be approved by three consecutive committees in three separate hearings before it can go to a final vote in the chamber in which it was introduced. HB 1828's January 26 hearing was in the first committee, Energy and Environmental Protection (EEP). If that committee had passed the bill, it would next have gone to the Economic Revitalization and Business (ERB) Committee. That committee's chairman then has the say over whether or not to give the bill a hearing. With three referrals, the bill must be given the okay by all three committees in order for it to be voted on by the whole House of Representatives. So, if you want to see the bill passed (or not), it's advisable to submit testimony to all three hearings. Testimony does not get conveyed from one hearing to the next. You can, however, use the same testimony for subsequent hearings if the bill is not changed much. If the bill is modified, you may have to update your testimony.

If the referral has committees separated by a slash, for example, if it was "EER/ERB" then both committees hear the bill together, i.e., at the same time and day. In that case, you only submit the testimony once for both committees at that one hearing, not to two separate committees. The committee that is first on that referral is the one that you should submit your testimony to, and is called the "lead" committee.

After a bill passes all of its committee referrals, it goes to the entire House or Senate for a vote, which is called a "floor vote". If it is approved by the majority of the legislators then it crosses over to the other side, where the hearing process is repeated. If you're still interested in the bill, then you can submit testimony in that chamber's committee hearings as well.

The Public Access Room (PAR) on the fourth floor of the State Capitol is a free service to help people participate in the legislative process. Hawaii's PAR was the first in the nation, and is nationally recognized for its innovation in citizen involvement in government.

The experienced staff of the Public Access Room can assist you with navigating the complex legislative process, especially with the short deadlines the Legislature has. They can help you locate your legislator's office, show you how to offer testimony or track a bill as it moves through its hearings and votes in each chamber, and teach you how to use the Legislature's website. They can answer questions about Hawaii's statutes, administrative rules, studies and reports, previously considered legislation and testimony, or state offices. The PAR is also a mini-office, with work space for you to charge and use your laptop, with free wireless. You can write and print your testimony, do research on issues, meet with a few others, do paperwork, read, or take a break. A photocopier is available for printing testimony or correspondence to legislators. On the Capitol's closed circuit television, you can watch broadcasts of hearings and House or Senate floor sessions. A telephone, TTY, and fax machine, are available as well as reference materials, including the Hawaii Revised Statutes, Session Laws, dictionaries, and directories.