

# DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TOURISM

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Statement of  
**JAMES KUNANE TOKIOKA**  
**Director**

Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism  
before the

## HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

Wednesday, February 11, 2026  
8:30 AM  
State Capitol, Conference Room 423

In consideration of  
**HB2138**  
**RELATING TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Chair Ilagan, Vice Chair Hussey, and members of the Committee: The Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism (DBEDT) offers comments on HB2138, which would establish a temporary Hilo–Kona Transportation Pilot Program within DBEDT.

DBEDT recognizes the long-standing challenges associated with limited, reliable, and affordable transportation options between East Hawai'i (Hilo) and West Hawai'i (Kona). Connectivity between these regions directly affects workforce participation, access to education and healthcare, business operations, and tourism activity. In this context, improved inter-regional mobility is appropriately framed as an economic and workforce development issue, not solely a transportation operations matter.

If DBEDT is designated as the lead agency, the Department believes its role should be clearly focused on:

- Evaluating how transportation connectivity affects workforce access, labor availability, and employer recruitment;

- Assessing economic demand, utilization patterns, and pricing sensitivity across worker, resident, and visitor travel;
- Convening public-sector, private-sector, and community partners to test market-responsive and scalable service models; and
- Providing data-driven findings and policy options to inform future legislative and investment decisions.

DBEDT does not operate transportation systems and does not view this pilot as creating a permanent transit service. Rather, DBEDT's value is in serving as a neutral convener and evaluator, coordinating with transportation agencies and service providers to determine whether targeted mobility solutions can meaningfully reduce economic and workforce barriers.

Successful implementation would require close coordination with:

- The Department of Transportation for technical expertise, regulatory alignment, and statewide transportation planning;
- The County of Hawai'i and its mass transit operations for local integration and operational insight; and
- Private-sector and nonprofit transportation providers capable of delivering pilot services.

This collaborative structure would allow the State to test solutions efficiently while avoiding duplication of existing transportation responsibilities.

To implement a pilot program consistent with the bill's intent, DBEDT would require dedicated resources, including:

- Program management and policy staff to design the pilot, manage partnerships, oversee contracts, and coordinate across agencies;
- Data collection and evaluation capacity to analyze ridership demand, workforce impacts, cost-effectiveness, and economic outcomes;
- Contractual funding to support pilot service delivery by qualified operators, including demand-responsive or public-private partnership models; and
- Reporting and planning resources to develop recommendations and any proposed legislation for consideration by the 2028 Legislature.

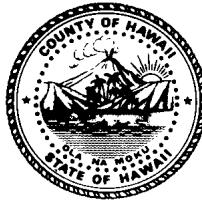
Absent dedicated funding and staffing, DBEDT's ability to meaningfully execute the pilot as envisioned would be limited.

DBEDT appreciates the Legislature's intent to address inter-regional connectivity on Hawai'i Island through a pilot approach. With clear alignment to economic and workforce objectives, appropriate interagency collaboration, and sufficient resources, this pilot could provide valuable insight into whether improved Hilo-Kona mobility can support economic resilience, workforce participation, and regional equity. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this measure.

C. Kimo Alameda, Ph.D.  
*Mayor*

Benson Medina  
*Director*

William V. Brilhante, Jr.  
*Managing Director*



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*Deputy Director*

## DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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February 11, 2026

### TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

#### HEARING BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TECHNOLOGY

Wednesday, February 11, 2026  
8:30 AM  
CONFERENCE ROOM 329

#### TESTIMONY ON HB 2138 Relating to Economic Development

Dear Chair Ilagan, Vice Chair Hussey, and Committee Members,

My name is Benson Medina, Director of the County of Hawaii, Department of Research and Development. Our Department is committed to fostering a stronger, more resilient, and culturally rooted future for our island community. Our programs cover Business and Industry Development, Agriculture and Food Systems, Regenerative Tourism, Film and Creative Media, Community Well-being, and Workforce Development.

Our Department is in **SUPPORT for HB2138**, which seeks to establish a Hilo-Kona transportation pilot program within the Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism to study, plan, evaluate, implement and trial transportation routes and services connected Hilo and Kona.

This bill addresses an important workforce issue for our residents as many commute daily from the east side of the island to the other to work in construction, hospitality, tourism or retail related jobs. This commute can take up to 2 hours one way and puts undue hardship for workers who do not have reliable transportation. With this study, important data can be collected to better inform County and State agencies on how to resource routes and provide better transportation mediums.

We thank you for your consideration of HB2138 and ask for your support in advancing this bill.

Sincerely,

Benson Medina,  
Director, Department of Research and Development



**TESTIMONY OF TINA YAMAKI, MANAGING DIRECTOR  
HAWAII TRANSPORATION ASSOCIATION  
FEBRUARY 11, 2026  
HB 2138 RELATING TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.**

Aloha Chair Iligan and members of the House Committee on Economic Development & Technology. I am Tina Yamaki, Managing Director of the Hawaii Transportation Association and I appreciate this opportunity to testify.

The Hawaii Transportation Association (HTA Hawaii) was founded in 1938 and incorporated in 1963, and is a private, non-profit trade organization dedicated to the service and assistance to the commercial ground transportation industry in the State of Hawaii. Our members include family owned small and medium sized businesses, independent owner operators, and national motor carriers range from delivery services to passenger carriers - as well as allied industry partners.

The HTA Hawaii supports HB 2138. This measure establishes a Hilo-Kona transportation pilot program within the Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism to study, plan, evaluate, implement, and trial transportation routes and services connecting Hilo and Kona.

Hawai'i Island's two largest population and economic centers - Hilo and Kona - are functionally disconnected by limited, inefficient, and costly transportation options. Residents, workers, students, patients seeking medical care, and visitors currently rely almost exclusively on private vehicles or expensive air travel to move between the island's east and west sides. This lack of reliable interregional transportation exacerbates economic inequality, increases traffic congestion, and limits access to employment, education, healthcare, and tourism opportunities.

This measure would allow the State to collect data, evaluate demand, and test feasible transportation solutions before committing to long-term infrastructure or operational investments. Locating the program within DBEDT is appropriate, as improved connectivity directly supports workforce mobility, regional economic development, visitor dispersal, and long-term sustainability goals.

A Hilo-Kona transportation pilot could also reduce vehicle miles traveled, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and improve roadway safety along heavily used corridors. By exploring multimodal options such as shuttle services, express buses, or other innovative transit models, the State can identify cost-effective alternatives that serve both residents and visitors while aligning with Hawai'i's climate and transportation objectives.

Importantly, this measure does not mandate a permanent system but instead promotes responsible planning and evidence-based decision-making. The pilot framework ensures accountability, fiscal prudence, and stakeholder input before broader implementation.

For these reasons, I urge your support of HB 2138. Establishing this pilot program is a necessary first step toward addressing long-standing transportation gaps on Hawai'i Island and advancing equitable, sustainable economic growth.

Mahalo for this opportunity to testify.



**HB-2138**

Submitted on: 2/9/2026 3:02:40 PM  
Testimony for ECD on 2/11/2026 8:30:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Glen Kagamida	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

STRONG SUPPORT!!!

**HB-2138**

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 9:18:26 AM  
Testimony for ECD on 2/11/2026 8:30:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Megan Blazak	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Honorable Chair Ilagan, Vice Chair Hussey, and Members of the Committee,

As a constituent of House District 2, I support the intent of this measure and offer the following comment:

Transportation is a challenge throughout Hawaii County, especially in the congested corridors from lower and upper Puna to Hilo town; South Hilo to Hilo Town, Kawaihae/Honokaa to Waimea; and south Kona to Kona town.

In the scope of the proposed pilot program, I suggest the program take an integrated look at transportation concerns in "shoulder" regions such as those stated above. The committee should consider ways that improvements to the Hilo-Kona transportation corridor could help alleviate some of the issues we see in these other regions that ultimately feed the Hilo-Kona corridor. Thank you.