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LEGISLATIVE REFERENCE BUREAU
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Written Comments

SB2219 **RELATING TO PUBLIC ACCESS**

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Presented to the Senate Committee on Government Operations

Tuesday, February 3, 2026, 3:00 p.m.
Room 225 & Via Videoconference

Chair McKelvey and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon, Chair McKelvey and members of the Committee, my name is Charlotte Carter-Yamauchi, and I am the Director of the Legislative Reference Bureau (Bureau). Thank you for providing the opportunity to submit written **comments** on S.B. No. 2219, Relating to Public Access.

The purpose of this measure is to establish a Capitol Visitor Center within the State Capitol to be maintained and operated by the Legislative Reference Bureau. In addition, the measure:

- (1) Requires the Joint Legislative Access Committee to review the operations of the Capitol Visitor Center and recommend policies to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives; and
- (2) Appropriates an unspecified amount of general funds for the establishment and operation of the Capitol Visitor Center, including the establishment and hiring of an unspecified number of full-time equivalent positions.

The Bureau takes no position on the merits of this measure but has very serious concerns and submits the following comments for your consideration.

The apparent intent of the measure is to place a Capitol Visitor Center within the functions of the Bureau. PAR, the only public-facing division within the Bureau, was established in 1994 *with the core mission of enhancing the public's ability to participate in the legislative process*; it became part of the Bureau in 1996. PAR's office and services are utilized year-round, offering equipment, services, and facilities to members of the public who seek to participate in the legislative process. PAR has only two permanent full-time staff members and adds up to two additional temporary staff during legislative sessions. At this staffing level, PAR is already severely challenged to maintain the demanding level of services it currently provides to the general public. While the demand lets up slightly during the interim, the challenge for the two permanent staff members is exacerbated, given this is the limited time period in which they can take vacation leave or if one or both needs to be out due to illness or personal reasons.

As some examples of the demanding PAR workload:

- **January 1 – June 30, 2025:**

Two permanent full-time PAR staff and two session staff handled **3,969 requests** for information regarding the legislative process, training, and services via email, phone calls, and in-person visits—an average of **660 requests per month**.

- **July 1 – December 31, 2025:**

With only **two full-time PAR staff**, PAR handled **1,282 requests** for information regarding the legislative process for service and training via email, phone calls, and walk-ins—an average of **213 requests per month**.

- **Workshops (not included in the above request totals):**

- **FY 2024–2025 (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025):**

- PAR staff conducted **68 workshops**, delivering **3,535 minutes of instruction** to **2,450 registrants**.

- **July 2025 – December 2025:**

- PAR provided **19 workshops** for **272 registrants**.

- **January 2026 (in preparation for the 2026 Legislative Session):**

- PAR offered **three public Zoom workshops** with **451 registrations**.

- These figures do not include YouTube views by individuals who did not register but watched recordings afterward.*

- **Unplanned and Large Group Visits:**

PAR frequently receives unannounced visits from large groups seeking training and assistance. While PAR staff attempt to accommodate these visitors, the Public

Access Room (Room 401) can seat **only 20 people** for workshops, which can prevent individual visitors from using public computers and workspace during this time. On opening day alone, **two groups of 50 students** (college and middle/high school) visited PAR. Due to space constraints, staff conducted these sessions in hallways amid significant noise and foot traffic.

- **Off-site Presentations Due to Space Limitations (FY 2024–2025):**

With sufficient prior notice, PAR staff regularly presented information regarding the legislative process to large visitor groups coordinated by legislator offices in locations outside Room 401, including the House Gallery, auditorium, and conference rooms:

- **50 students**, Lincoln Elementary – September 2024 (House Gallery)
- **30 students**, Hanahou'oli School – June 2024 and November 2024 (House Gallery)
- **75 students**, Farrington High School – November 2024 (House Gallery)
- **200 students**, Punahou Schools – November 2024 (Conference rooms)
- **60 students**, Fort Shafter Elementary – January 2025 (House Gallery)

This measure provides funds for an unspecified number of permanent full-time equivalent position to be placed within PAR to establish and operate a Capitol Visitor Center but does not seem to consider the extremely detrimental impact this additional burden will have on PAR's already strained ability to meet its core statutory mission of enhancing the public's ability to participate in the legislative process.

Furthermore, this measure goes far beyond just establishing and operating a Capitol Visitor Center, since it also includes the responsibility to "promote the State's attractions, including its natural resources, cultural heritage, experiences, and locally produced goods and services". This responsibility is not even remotely within the statutory purposes and duties of the Bureau or PAR as established under sections 23G-3 and 23G-12, Hawaii Revised Statutes, nor should the Bureau be tasked with making a subjective determination on which State attractions, natural resources, cultural heritage subjects, experiences, and locally produced goods and services should be promoted. In addition, it is unclear what type of "collaboration with the office of the governor" is intended to mean if the Bureau is to establish and maintain a Capitol Visitor Center.

Moreover, this measure fails to recognize other serious challenges and disruptions to its core statutory mission that PAR will incur if required to establish, maintain, and operate a Capitol Visitor Center. It simply is not sustainable to accommodate walk-in patrons looking for a workspace, provide even a brief introduction to PAR services much less longer training, answer patrons' questions in person or by phone, and operate a Capitol Visitor Center in the

limited space PAR currently occupies. Accordingly, if the intended scope of the Capitol Visitor Center program is to accommodate large groups, PAR would need substantial additional staff and space within the Capitol building to limit disruption to PAR's existing core services, especially during the legislative session when the PAR room is often filled to capacity. Further, we note that neither PAR nor the Bureau has any expertise or experience with respect to creating, managing, or operating a Capitol Visitor Center or with creating, maintaining, and updating a Capitol Visitor Center webpage, and certainly no expertise with respect to promoting the "State's attractions, including its natural resources, cultural heritage, experiences, and locally produced goods and services."

The Bureau notes that among the fifty states, only a few capitol tour programs are managed by Legislative Service Agencies: Oregon (Legislative Administration Committee), Iowa (Legislative Services Agency), Colorado (Colorado Legislative Council), New Jersey Office of Legislative Services (OLS), Washington (Legislative Support Services), and Arizona (Legislative Council). Further, there are at least sixteen states that operate Capitol Visitor programs. Some do not operate an actual visitor center but provide visitor services. The also Bureau notes that legislative agencies charged with the responsibility of operating capitol tour programs are in the extreme minority. Below is a breakdown of how these sixteen states delegate the Capitol Visitor Center functions:

Alabama State Capitol (Montgomery)

MANAGED BY Alabama Historical Commission (including gift shop)

LOCATED inside Capitol, at an information desk; tours begin there.

TOURS: Guided tours require advance reservations for groups of 15 or more. Self-guided tours are available anytime during operating hours.

Open: Mon-Sat 8-4

ANNUAL VISITORS: 100,000

Arkansas State Capitol (Little Rock)

MANAGED BY Arkansas Secretary of State

LOCATED inside the Capitol / first floor rotunda

TOURS: 7 days and state holidays 50 hours per week (guided and self-guided)

OPEN: Mon-Fri 8 to 5; weekends and holidays 10-3

ANNUAL VISITORS: 20,000+

California Capitol Visitors Center (Sacramento)

MANAGED BY California Capitol Museum (part of the California State Parks system)

LOCATED on the Capitol campus, and the museum includes exhibits on California history, state symbols, tours of historic offices, and gift shop.

TOURS guided, hourly

OPEN 40 hours per week (9-5)

ANNUAL VISITORS: 1 million

Colorado Capitol Visitors Center (Denver)

MANAGED BY Capitol Building Visitor Services funded by the Legislature

LOCATED within the CO Capitol (first floor) with gift shop

TOURS, guided, hourly, 6/day

OPEN 35 hours per week (9-4)

FTEs 3 + college work study students and volunteers

ANNUAL VISITORS: 300,000 with 70,000 people participating in tours of the rotunda dome

Florida State Capitol (Tallahassee)

MANAGED BY VISIT FLORIDA, the state's official tourism marketing corporation.

Offers complimentary fresh Florida orange juice during the legislative session.

LOCATED inside the Capitol, first floor

TOURS: Weekday guided tours for groups are available and can be scheduled by contacting the center in advance. Self-guided tour brochures are also available from the desk.

OPEN: Mon-Fri 8-5 (45 hours)

ANNUAL VISITORS: unclear

Illinois Capitol Visitors Center (Springfield)

MANAGED BY Illinois Secretary of State

LOCATED across the street from the Capitol building at 425 South College Street.

TOURS: every half hour, including weekends

OPEN: Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but closed on weekends and state holidays. TOURS available weekends.

CENTER: offers free parking, restrooms, picnic tables, and a theatre that screens a 20-minute captioned video about the Capitol.

While the Visitors Center provides general information, free guided tours of the actual Capitol building are available daily (except major holidays) and begin in the Capitol Rotunda.

ANNUAL VISITORS: 120,000

Maine State Capitol (Augusta)

MANAGED BY nearby Maine State Museum

TOURS: Guided tours can be arranged through the nearby Maine State Museum, but walk-ins can inquire at the Welcome Center for availability.

OPEN: The Capitol is open to the public year-round, Monday through Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

ANNUAL VISITORS: roughly 100,000

Massachusetts State House (Boston)

MANAGED BY the Secretary of the Commonwealth, Division of State House Tours

LOCATED within the State House and operates gift cart

TOURS, guided, hourly, by volunteer docents

OPEN 40 hours per week (9-5)

FTEs undisclosed / under the Division Director + volunteers

Established by an act of the legislature in 1969

ANNUAL VISITORS: 90,000

Michigan State Capitol Visitors Center (Lansing)

MANAGED BY The Michigan State Capitol Commission with funding provided by the Michigan legislature.

LOCATED in Heritage Hall, a 40,000-square-foot underground visitor center opened in 2022 (located at 323 W. Ottawa St.). It includes exhibit spaces, an orientation room, and the Capitol Gift Shop.

OPEN 45 hours per week (Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.). The Capitol also opens on the first Saturday of each month from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. for guided tours only.

Tours free guided tours of the Capitol building. Weekday tours typically start at the top of the hour (8 per day, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.). Specialized Zoom tours and self-guided brochures are also available for independent exploration.

10-12 FTE's and a dedicated team of **volunteer docents** who lead the majority of tours during the busy school season.

ANNUAL VISITORS: 115,000

New Mexico, the Roundhouse (Santa Fe)

New Mexico does not have a Visitors Center but connected with the Capitol Art Foundation

TOURS are self-guided with a brochure

OPEN 50 hours per week (7:30 to 5:30) plus summer Saturdays

FTEs undisclosed but does have a “Legislative Information and Tours” contact;

ANNUAL VISITORS: 100,000

New York: Empire State Plaza Visitor's Center (Albany)

MANAGED BY the Office of General Services (OGS)

LOCATED outside the Capitol but attached. Includes a gift shop

The Visitor Center is part of a major complex that connects the Capitol, staff offices, Agency buildings, the Convention Center, and the State Archives/Museum

TOURS, guided, walk-in and groups, First Friday evenings

OPEN 35 hours per week (8:30 am to 3:30 pm) + some special events

FTEs undisclosed; relies on volunteer “ambassadors” for tours and to keep the Capitol observation deck open

ANNUAL VISITORS: 200,000

North Dakota State Capitol (Bismarck)

MANAGED BY North Dakota Office of Management and Budget (OMB) facilities division

LOCATED an Information Desk on the ground floor that functions as the visitor's center. Next door: North Dakota Heritage Center & State Museum.

TOURS: Free guided tours are available year-round on weekdays, with additional weekend tours offered during the summer. Self-guided tours use maps from the desk.

OPEN: Mon-Fri 8-5 (40 hours)

ANNUAL VISITORS: 30,000

Oregon Welcome Center (Salem)

MANAGED BY Visitor Services (a unit of Legislative Administration) funded by the Oregon State Legislature.

LOCATED in the Capitol (900 Court St. NE, Salem) on the first floor, alongside the Capitol Store (gift shop).

OPEN 45 hours per week (Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.). The Capitol Store is open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

TOURS free guided building tours on the hour (typically 4 per day: 10:30, 11:30, 1:30, and 2:30). Virtual 360° tours and self-guided walking tour brochures are also available.

4-6 FTE's and a robust volunteer program

ANNUAL VISITORS: Over 200,000

Texas Capitol Visitors Center (Austin)

MANAGED BY The State Preservation Board (SPB), which is chaired by the Governor and funded by the Texas Legislature.

LOCATED in the restored 1857 **General Land Office building** (a castle-like structure on the southeast corner of the Capitol grounds). It features interactive exhibits, two short films, and the **Capitol Gift Shop** on the first floor.

OPEN 53 hours per week (Monday–Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday 12 p.m. to 5 p.m.).

TOURS free guided tours of the Capitol building. Tours depart every 30 to 45 minutes from the South Foyer of the Capitol. Special specialty tours (such as Women in Texas History or Heroes of the Texas Revolution) are also offered seasonally.

10-12 FTE's, state docents, and a large pool of community volunteers

ANNUAL VISITORS: approximately 1.3 million

Vermont State House (Montpelier)

MANAGED BY *Vermont does not have a visitor's desk; however, visitors are advised: the Sergeant-at-Arms Office* "are always available to answer your questions, sign out free audio tour wands, and to direct you to your next destination. **They ... provide frontline visitor services within the State House.**"

OPEN 40 hours per week (8 to 4)

TOURS, guided July-Oct with volunteers; self-guided tours year-round.

FTEs one Tours Coordinator plus Sergeant's 6 doorkeepers and "over 100 volunteer tour guides."

ANNUAL VISITORS: 150,000

Virginia State Capitol (Richmond)

MANAGED BY a partnership (see below)

LOCATED: dedicated, multi-purpose facility that serves as its visitor entrance and center, located in an underground extension of the main building in Richmond.

TOURS: Mon-Sat 8:30-5 + Sun 1-5 (46 hours/week)

CENTER: Visitor's Desk / Exhibition Space / gift shop / café

Management of the Virginia State Capitol Visitor Center is a collaborative effort between several state agencies and organizations:

Department of General Services (DGS) / Virginia General Assembly (VGA) / Division of Capitol Police / and Virginia Capitol Foundation: A non-profit partner that supports the interpretation and preservation of the Capitol and its grounds, often providing additional educational resources.

ANNUAL VISITORS: 100,000

Historically, the Hawaii State Capitol Tours program has been housed in the Office of the Governor, most recently in its Community Relations area. To this point, the Office of the Governor already has a "Hawai'i State Capitol Tours" page on its website that includes a virtual tour and a self-guided tour brochure. **Given its historical expertise in running a tour program and having a pre-existing State Capitol Tours webpage, substantially more existing space within the Capitol building than PAR, and considerably more resources than the Bureau or PAR, the Office of the Governor seems to be the appropriate entity in which to formalize a Capitol Visitor Center program. We note that this is especially so given that jurisdiction over the Capitol building resides with the executive branch (Department of Accounting and General Services), rather than the legislative branch.**

The Bureau also notes that during the 2023 Regular Session, a more limited measure than the present one, S.B. No. 699, was considered by the Legislature, which sought to transfer the Capitol tours function to the Lieutenant Governor's office. **The Lieutenant Governor's testimony before the Senate Committee on Government Operations on this measure indicated that this function was currently and appropriately housed within the Office of the Governor.** Further, the Lieutenant Governor noted that if her office was tasked with this responsibility, they would need the following resources just to successfully fulfill programmatic needs at the level currently offered:

- Two (2) additional FTEs to coordinate and provide tours, of which one (1) FTE is fluent in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i to ensure both official languages of the State of Hawaii are spoken;
- Funding to procure, clean, operate, and maintain individual audio systems for self-guided tours; and
- Funding and support to produce tour materials and signage in foreign languages.

Should the Committee decide that it still would like the Bureau, through PAR, to establish a Capitol Visitor Center program, given our substantial concerns and even though it would be somewhat redundant to the one already operated by the Governor, we respectfully request that the Committee:

- (1) Reframe the nature of the Capitol Visitor Center program envisioned and the scope of work involved by removing paragraph (3) on page 1, lines 12-14 of the measure;
- (2) Clarify the intent of the phrase "collaboration with the office of the governor" on page 1, lines 9-11;
- (3) Very seriously consider the spatial, technological, and experiential challenges that creation, maintenance, and operation of such a program would create within PAR, and the extreme disruption this would present to PAR's existing core mission; and
- (4) Provide sufficient staffing, space, and resources, at a minimum, similar to those requested in 2023 by the Lieutenant Governor in her testimony on similar legislation, to assist PAR in its attempt to successfully carry out this responsibility.

Thank you again for your consideration.