



HAWAII HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

OPENING DAY REMARKS 2017 LEGISLATIVE SESSION JOSEPH M. SOUKI SPEAKER HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVE JANUARY 18, 2017

Aloha and welcome to your House of Representatives—The People’s House.

After more than 35 years in the legislature, I never tire of seeing this place come alive and bursting with activity, at the start of each session.

And I am always impressed with the diversity of people that come together under this rotunda.

We come from Waianae and Waimanalo; from Hilo and Kona; from Poipu and Princeville; from Kaupo and Kaanapali; and all points in between.

And while our reasons and motivations may vary widely, we all share a common purpose: to participate in this government and help shape our collective future.

We in Hawaii have a strong and compelling sense of place that shapes who we are.

We all share this overarching sense of place: whether you were born and raised here or chose it for your adopted home.

Hawaii does that to you.

And when change comes to this place—as it must—we begrudgingly accept it, but only after making sure that it is in the best interest of Hawaii.

When school curriculums must be updated for a changing world, when the way we measure academic success no longer applies, and when our education system must evolve from the way we’ve always done things, we push back and cautiously ask, “Why are they no longer good enough?”

But I know the DOE and the Administration are hard at work implementing sound and necessary changes, and we look forward to working with them to improve our public schools.

When we could no longer afford to deliver health care on Maui the way we used to, we understandably pushed back because we are protective of others who may be affected by change.

But we needed to find a better way of change. And we did.

So this July, we look forward to completing the privatization of Maui's public hospitals and initiating a new era of health care delivery on the Valley Isle.

When gridlock chokes our daily commute and threatens the efficient operation of our businesses and our quality of life, we resist dramatic changes.

We hope lesser incremental ones will do the job.

But they won't and only serve to cost us more in the long term.

So we look to solutions like rail to relieve traffic on our roads. It does come with a high cost, but make no mistake, rail is the key to the future of Oahu.

The Mayor of Honolulu has proposed extending the general excise tax, as a way of financing the growing cost of rail.

I agree. We need to remove the sunset date on the original financing bill—but only if we reduce the tax rate, with the city making up the difference.

In addition, we should also lower the amount allocated for administrative costs from 10 to 5 percent.

But rail alone will not solve the entire problem of traffic congestion on Oahu.

We must employ a multi-faceted approach, utilizing our buses, flex scheduling and technology that allows distance learning, tele medicine and alternative workplaces to reduce commuter travel.

Elevated toll roads...privately owned and funded by users... could be a part of our efforts to mitigate traffic congestion.

These roads would allow trucking companies, tour buses and other businesses to operate more efficiently, while removing them from our grade level streets.

Other cities across the country and the world have successfully integrated toll roads, as part of their transportation network, including Singapore, which has similar limited space and population density as Honolulu.

Therefore, I am proposing that we do a feasibility study to see whether toll roads make sense for Honolulu and how they might be integrated with rail, our buses and our existing highway system.

Change must also come to our prisons, where we can no longer house the numbers we are incarcerating.

Presently, about 5,900 inmates fill our state prisons. Another 1,400 are in federal prisons, with 1,400 on parole and 21,000 on probation.

This totals to about 30,000 individuals who are being managed under our criminal justice system, either behind bars or under supervision.

With no new prison in sight for at least 10 years, we need to find alternatives to incarceration.

So what can we do?

The legislature has already created a task force on improving the correctional system, and last year passed a law that allows the prison director to release some types of low-level nonviolent inmates.

We also provided funds for increasing the number of beds in Hilo, Maui, and Kauai. But we must build on those efforts.

For those awaiting trial and those guilty of misdemeanors, white collar or non-violent crimes, we can confine them to their homes by using electronic bracelets.

With new technology, we can employ varying degrees of restrictions based on the crime committed, and monitor movements of those under supervision.

What I'm talking about is creating a whole new level of "Non-Institutionalized Incarceration."

It would revamp our prison system and lessen the cost of incarceration.

The benefits would not only include less crowded facilities, but allow us to better focus on rehabilitating inmates.

Protecting our residents also means keeping an eye on federal regulations that benefit our state.

This session we will propose critical amendments to Hawaii's National Flood Insurance Program. Amending our laws to comply with FEMA's floodplain management regulations will protect 60,000 flood insurance policy holders in jeopardy of losing this critical coverage.

Since 1980, Hawaii has received more than \$400 million from FEMA through this program.

Rest assured, we will fix this situation and make sure flood insurance coverage continues.

Along with our sense of place, is our compassion for others.

With the new Trump administration about to be sworn in in Washington D.C., we know the rich will be well looked after, but it is now incumbent upon individual states like Hawaii to make sure low income families are given support when needed.

There is nothing more important to human dignity than food on the table and a roof over your head, therefore, a priority of the House will be to continue to provide food and rental tax credits for families in need.

At times, our compassion can also be severely tested.

Nowhere is this more evident than in recent discussions about whether Hawaii should allow Compassionate Care or the right to Die with Dignity.

Those who are suffering from a terminal illness and are of sound mind should be given the opportunity to decide how they will end their own lives.

Therefore, I will be submitting a bill this session to decide the issue.

We have a lot on our plate for this session. And the last revenue forecast by the Council on Revenues does not make our job any easier.

But we've been there before, as lawmakers and as a community. And we will together find solutions to our most pressing issues.

So I call on each and every one of you to roll up your sleeves and join me in doing what we need to do for all of Hawaii.

May God bless all of you.

Thank you and Aloha.

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