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COMMENTARY

## Business, labor, politicians can come together

By Vicky Cayetano

The headline "\$151 million tax cut now law" (Honolulu Advertiser, June 4) was good news for the business community.

But the equally important story that was not mentioned is that Act 110 — which will lower the taxable wage base used to calculate what employers pay for unemployment insurance, while increasing the benefits for unemployed workers for a three-year period — is a classic example of what can be accomplished when parties engage each other with respect for the other's point of view and are open to reasonable compromise. Sadly, this has not always been the case between business, labor and the Legislature in the past.

Because of past disappointments, a good number of people told me that the Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i was wasting its time in seeking reform of the unemployment insurance trust because the Legislature was not empathetic to the concerns of business and the labor unions would oppose it.

With a surplus of \$540 million in the unemployment insurance trust reserve, and the state unemployment rate one of the lowest in the nation, however, the Chamber owed it to its membership of more than 1,100 businesses representing more than 200,000 employees throughout our state to try.

Thus, Act 110 (aka HB 1500) was set as the No. 1 priority of the Chamber's legislative agenda. After years of failing to persuade the Legislature to reform unemployment benefits, the Chamber finally succeeded. As chairwoman of the Chamber, I took part in many of the interactions and discussions that moved the bill forward. In the end, I believe that the process was one that many businesses could learn much from, as I did.

Crafting good legislation that is balanced and fair to all parties is never an easy task, but Rep. Robert Nakasone managed to do just that with HB 1500. Nakasone, who is a small business owner having operated a painting company on Maui for nearly 20 years, has a vast and impressive understanding of how the unemployment insurance law works and took the time to patiently explain its nuances to me, Chamber President Jim Tollefson and our staff.

Sen. Clayton Hee and Rep. Alex Sonson, then respective chairs of the Senate and House committees on labor, played key roles in moving the bill forward. Both chairmen demonstrated a refreshing open-minded approach to listening to our concerns. The legislative process can seem like a bewildering maze to a lay person like me, and throughout the legislative session, they provided the steady hands needed to help us get the bill through both houses of the Legislature.

And contrary to popular belief, our legislators work hard. During critical moments of the bill's progress, I was pleased to be able to contact and discuss it with senators and representatives who I discovered were still working late into the night and on weekends at their offices.

Finally, I was pleasantly surprised at how willing key leaders of the public and private sector labor unions were to meet with us and discuss the concerns and issues of their membership. We listened to their concerns and tried to understand their point of view. They responded in kind. And a compromise was reached. Those in the business community who dismiss organized labor as unreasonable and uncaring of the concerns of business do themselves a disservice — and are unlikely to get much done. Without organized labor's willingness to "come to the table," I don't believe that Act 110 would have come to fruition.

Legislators have been elected to serve all the people of Hawai'i and by and large they attempt to bring a balanced perspective to everything they do.

Act 110 will save businesses an estimated \$151 million dollars over the next three years. As one business advocate said, "not

too shabby in the world of business."

It stands as proof that the business, labor and political leaders of Hawai'i are able to work together to provide for the greater good of all people when we are solution-oriented, listen to opposing views and treat each other with respect.

*Vicky Cayetano is chairwoman of the Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.*

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