



Blacked out? TV cameras could be off for council budget work

Michael Levine - The Garden Island | Posted: Monday, March 15, 2010 11:45 pm

LIHUE — The County Council's annual budget deliberations, during which the heads of various county departments and agencies are grilled about their spending proposals, could once again take place with the cameras off.

The debate briefly bubbled up during a conversation on a peripherally related communication during last week's Budget and Finance Committee meeting, and is set to get a full airing this week when a communication from Councilmembers Tim Bynum and Lani Kawahara hits the agenda Wednesday.

"I think it's the most important decision-making we do all year, and it's the most interest meetings we have all year," Bynum said Monday. "The mayor's office comes and gives us their goals and objectives, and there's a give and take."

Kawahara agreed, saying the budget is "even more (important) than legislation" because "it has a big, overriding impact on the programs that the county provides, and it's especially important this year because of how tight everything is going to be."

When it was discussed last week, Budget and Finance Committee Chair Daryl Kaneshiro pointed to fiscal concerns as a reason for not broadcasting the meetings on Ho'ike, a sentiment echoed Monday by Mayor Bernard Carvalho Jr.

"My main concern is the availability of funding for FY2010," Carvalho said in an e-mail. "We have looked at this request and determined that there is not sufficient funding this year to televise these proceedings."

Responding to a communication from Kaneshiro, Office of Boards and Commissions Administrator John Isobe said the council's estimate of nine meetings over two or three weeks in early April averaging seven hours each would cost the county approximately \$17,400 to broadcast — about \$275 per hour.

Of the \$225,000 allocated for Ho'ike broadcasts of various government meetings in Fiscal Year 2010, \$130,294 was encumbered in anticipation of a fourth-quarter 2010 launch of a new video streaming project.

The streaming project had only been allocated \$20,000 this year — of the \$245,000 appropriation for "other services" — due to "uncertainty about the exact implementation date and cost," Isobe wrote to Kaneshiro on March 5.

As of February 2010, the Office of Boards and Commissions had expended \$66,581.46 of the remaining money, leaving just \$27,390, "sufficient to cover the current Ho'ike television broadcasting schedule until May 2010," Isobe wrote, but presumably not enough to cover the proposed \$17,400 for the budget meetings.

Asked via e-mail if he, the mayor or the council make the decision on whether to broadcast the meetings, Isobe said, "I believe that the decision for scheduling and/or broadcasting council-related meetings rests with the council. However, this assumes adequate funding is available and/or will be appropriated in the budget. The county cannot authorize work for which there are insufficient funds."

Carvalho signaled his openness to the idea, writing, "If it is the council's desire to televise these hearings in the future and they are willing to work with us to provide the necessary funding, we'll be happy to work with them to make it happen."

Ho'ike Managing Director J Robertson said Monday that the television station would be ready to film and broadcast the meetings if the county asks them to.

"All the government affairs are important for public viewing. The more informed the citizens are, the better decisions they can make," Robertson said. "We would certainly help the county in any of their determined efforts."

With Carvalho, Isobe and Robertson pointing back to the council, the county's legislative body will need to determine what steps come next.

Bynum said while some government waste could be exposed if the meetings are more transparent, many citizens would be proud of their government if they saw how professionally it doles out hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer funds.

“I think that most people can’t make it to the public hearings at the council itself; this is a good way to reach as many people as possible,” Kawahara said. “It would add to the transparency that we’ve been trying to reach for the past two years.”

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