



"If we adjourn with this record, we do not deserve to return to office."

Sen. Milton Holt

'96 LEGISLATURE: DUD

*It ended with a whimper --
and lawmakers blamed each other for the failures*

By Mike Yuen
Star-Bulletin

It began with much determination and promise. But the 1996 Legislature ended in a cross-fire of blame for a disappointing session in which none of the major issues were resolved.

Legislative leaders acknowledged that much remains to be done and that the tasks ahead, particularly the state's budget woes, loom even larger than the challenges they faced this year.

Senate President Norman Mizuguchi



Yet that acknowledgment seemed lost amid the rapid-fire criticism that echoed yesterday. And it was not limited to the election-year partisan attacks from minority Republicans that caused the House to endure a 12-hour session ending at 10 p.m.

Even within party ranks, Democrat was blaming Democrat.

State Democratic Party Chairman Richard Port called a news conference to declare that legislators failed to provide a solution to the high cost of Hawaii's no-fault automobile insurance system, nor did they eliminate the "high- three" pension perk for lawmakers -- both key legislative issues.

Port in particular blamed two powerful Democratic senators, Milton Holt (Palama) and Donna Ikeda (Hawaii Kai).

Holt, Port charged, has been unwilling to work with his Senate colleagues or with the House to resolve the auto insurance problem.

Ikeda runs Ways and Means like "a dictatorship in which she does not consult with the members of the committee," Port said.

"I am disappointed and hurt by Mr. Port's personal attack," Ikeda answered on the Senate floor. "Mr. Port's personal attack is totally unjustified."

Sen. Mike Liu

Sen. Randy Iwase (D, Mililani) defended Holt and Ikeda, saying Port and others have rushed to place blame when difficult problems are not quickly solved.

Holt said the session's five top issues - budget woes, economic development, auto insurance, "high-three" pension reform and same-sex marriage - weren't resolved because the Legislature lacked strong leadership and because Port failed to provide direction.

As a result, Holt told his colleagues, they have nothing to show voters.

"If we adjourn with this record, we do not deserve to return to office," said Holt, who later refused to say if he'll seek re-election.



'Back to square one'

While acknowledging the session was marked by "missed opportunities," Senate President Norman Mizuguchi (D, Aiea) said lawmakers' achievements included granting counties limited immunity from beach-related lawsuits, as well as bills that got tough on crime and provided educational reforms.

"As always, much remains to be done, and the accomplishments of the next legislative session will be rooted in our actions today," Mizuguchi said.

House Speaker Joe Souki (D, Wailuku) added: "Difficult things take a longer time."

Souki was more insistent than Mizuguchi that the session be viewed favorably: "I don't care what Norman says. The House has a

different view. The House has a positive view."

Mizuguchi said, "We're back to square one: stimulating the economy and cutting the budget."

Lack of revenue options

Legislative leaders said this session was hampered by the lack of revenue-generating options. Legalized gambling will have to be on the table again, Mizuguchi maintained.

Souki wasn't optimistic about any form of gaming passing next year. "Well, I'm not going to hold my breath. I've been trying for 14 years and failing for 14 years," he said. "I'm not making any predictions. But there may be a few attempts."

House Finance Chairman Calvin Say (D, Palolo Valley) said lawmakers next year could be confronting a significant fiscal problem: a \$300 million budget shortfall. And that's a conservative estimate.

List of issues looms

What's looming: workload increases in the prisons and departments of Education and Health to meet federal consent decrees; demands to restore welfare cuts; collective bargaining settlements; more Hawaiian homelands claims; and about \$120 million in out-of-state coffers if the state loses a lawsuit to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

OHA is asserting that the state hasn't paid all royalties due for use of ceded lands.

The state counters that OHA is trying to get more than what is due by claiming payments derived from improvements when payments should be limited to royalties from raw land.

Capitalizing on failures

House Republicans were eager to try to capitalize on what they saw as the Democratic-controlled Legislature's failures.

Rep. Chris Halford (R, Kihei) quoted Port's press release saying that he was concerned about deep cuts to general assistance for the mentally and physically disabled.

House Minority Leader Gene Ward (R, Aina Haina) tried to use

Democratic Rep. Alex Santiago's vote against the budget to bolster the GOP argument that the budget was emblematic of a rocky future for the state.

A visibly upset Santiago (Kahuku), the only Democrat to vote against the budget because of concerns over welfare cuts, interrupted Ward to object over how his position was being used.

Souki called a recess to cool tempers.

In the Senate, there was more decorum. The Democrats' 5.3 percent cut in state general fund spending wasn't impressive, said Senate Minority Leader Michael Liu (R, Kaneohe).

"But," he added, "it is a very small step in the right direction."

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