

Convention center should be open to local business, lawmaker says

**But a state official contends that's
not the point of the project**

By Russ Lynch
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The state should dump its policy of closing its \$300 million-plus convention center to local business in between the big conventions from out of state, says Rep. Gene Ward, a Republican member of the House finance committee.

It should be booking local business to fill the gaps after its July 1998 opening, Ward said.

Wrong, said Alan Hayashi, executive director of the Hawaii Convention Center Authority.

Hayashi defended the authority's decision to keep the center closed between the national and international conventions.

The marketers cannot afford to allow local bookings to jam up openings they may need for the main events, Hayashi said.

The whole purpose in building the center, he said, is to attract conventioners from outside Hawaii, who will fill hotel rooms and bring money into the state's economy.

"I can understand pressure from local promoters who would like to use this center, but that doesn't do anything for our economy," Hayashi said.

Ward said he understands the rationale and wouldn't want to see local business supplant outside business.

"However, if you don't have anybody coming from offshore and you have a three-month puka there, it make sense" to book local business, he said.

His point was that after the expected visit of 8,000 people for an American Federation of State County & Municipal Employees convention in late August 1998 and a 10,000-person visit the next month by Autobacs, a Japanese automobile parts business, nothing is booked until the spring of 1999.

"This is a waste of taxpayers' money. The convention center was built so it would attract business to help our ailing economy but so far only 17 conventions have been booked," Ward said.

Hayashi said the center was built for the offshore visitor. "We're following that mandate," he said.

The authority will review the policy soon, Hayashi added, but with only a year and half to go before opening, the all-out effort must be to attract outside conventions.

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