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Cost, logistics wilt bill requiring leis for air arrivals

By Pat Omandam
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When Harry Nunnemacher of Milwaukee stepped off the plane at Honolulu Airport on Saturday, his tour agency gave him a lei.

While it was welcomed, Nunnemacher yesterday said he didn't know what to do with it 20 minutes later.

Similar sentiments were shared by Chicago-area tourists Jim and Ann Andrew. The couple, who arrived Sunday for a two-week visit, said a bill before the Legislature requiring the state to give leis to airport arrivals is a waste of money.

"It's a nice touch, but we would rather see the (state) employees get a pay raise," Ann Andrew said while sightseeing at the state Capitol.

The House Tourism Committee yesterday voted 4-2 to hold the bill, which would have required the Department of Transportation to give leis and provide Hawaiian music at all state airports.

House Bill 2464, introduced by Rep. Gene Ward (R, Aina Haina), was met with immediate opposition by transportation officials, who calculated that -- at \$1 a lei -- it would cost the state at least \$8 million.

Transportation Director Kazu Hayashida yesterday testified there were 7.7 million passengers who got off planes in Honolulu, Kahului, Kona, Lihue and Hilo in 1996. During the first nine months of 1997, about 5.9 million people arrived, he said.

Hayashida also opposed the plan because there is no way to determine whether an arriving traveler is a resident or visitor. And he's worried about storage, staffing and congestion.

After the hearing, Ward said the bill was intended to force state officials to be creative in tourism, because it had lost its competitive edge. As far as the cost, Ward said shell or plastic leis could be made for less than 10 cents each.

The Airlines Committee of Hawaii and the Hawaii Hotel Association favored the bill, but only if funding didn't affect the state's budget for the Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau or the federal Airport Special Fund.