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House shifts fireworks debate

Counties may decide on outlawing explosives; task force set up for imports

By Derrick DePledge
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The state House yesterday agreed to give counties the power to ban fireworks, a step several lawmakers described as an imperfect compromise that may help reduce the excessive fireworks displays that cause smoke, noise and safety hazards in many neighborhoods.

The bill also would establish a task force of law enforcement, regulatory, shipping and fireworks industry officials to develop a plan to prevent illegal fireworks imports.

The state Senate will now decide whether to accept the bill or send it to a House and Senate conference committee for final consideration.

Several House lawmakers who want a statewide ban on fireworks acknowledged the bill only shifts the debate to the counties. Other lawmakers who believe the problem is a lack of enforcement of existing state law — not the absence of a ban — voted for the bill with

reservations, since the issue could have political consequences in an election year.

State law allows consumer fireworks on New Year's Eve, Chinese New Year's Day and the Fourth of July. Aerials and other dangerous explosives are illegal except for professional displays by permitted fireworks experts.

Many residents complain that state law is routinely ignored and that police do not have the ability or manpower to enforce the restrictions. Although not vocal at the state Capitol, others have defended the home-grown displays as a cultural tradition in the Islands.

The state law was passed in 1994 to bring uniformity to various county regulations. The bill that moved out of the House yesterday would allow counties to adopt regulations that are tougher than state law.

State Rep. Marilyn Lee, D-38th (Mililani, Mililani Mauka), said the excessive fireworks displays that occurred on New Year's Eve were among the worst in memory and pose severe health and safety risks to people and pets.

"Although this bill is not perfect, I'm happy to see it go forward, because I'd be embarrassed if we go through the session without any action on fireworks," she said.

State Rep. Barbara Marumoto, R-19th (Kaimukī, Wai'ālae, Kāhala), called the bill a "pale imitation" of a statewide ban but voted in favor. She said she doubts all counties

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would take action.

State House Minority Leader Lynn Finnegan, R-32nd (Lower Pearlridge, 'Āiea, Hālawā), was among only three lawmakers to vote against the bill. She supports a statewide ban and believes the House should have brought a ban to a vote.

"This issue has been around for so long that we should just take a vote on whether or not we should have a ban," she said.

State Rep. Gene Ward, R-17th (Kalama Valley, Queen's Gate, Hawai'i Kai), said there is only one answer: "Enforcement, enforcement, enforcement," he said.

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