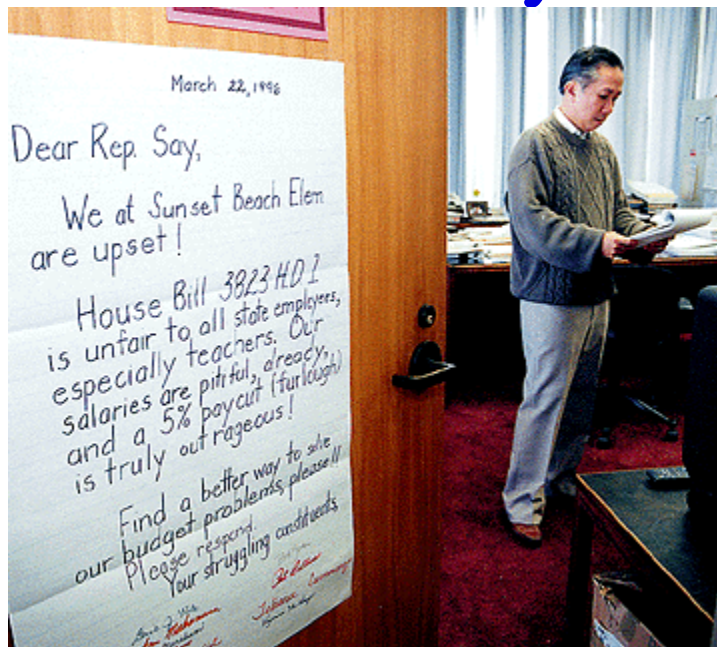


No money



By Craig T. Kojima, Star-Bulletin

Rep. Calvin Say posted this letter from unhappy people on his office door.

The budget is the top item on an issue-packed agenda for the state Legislature

By Mike Yuen
Star-Bulletin



A grim mood hangs over the state Capitol. Even apprehension.

"No money," laments state Rep. Dennis Arakaki (D, Kalihi Valley), a champion of the needy.

House Finance Chairman Calvin Say (D, Palolo), who realizes the urgency of boosting the isles' stagnant economy, adds, "We're not getting many new ideas."

Say, Arakaki and the state's other 74 lawmakers are bracing for one of their toughest sessions when the 1997 Legislature convenes Wednesday.

They'll be confronting significant issues that have lingered from previous sessions - budget woes, auto insurance reform and same-sex marriage, for example.

They also admit they're under pressure from a restless electorate to produce after last year's so-called "do-nothing" session.

"This year, it will be a defining session for political leadership," acknowledges Avery Chumbley (D, Kihei), Senate Judiciary co-chairman.



That's particularly true in the Senate. In addition to having untested chairmen such as Chumbley leading the chamber's most important committees, these leaders will work under a new dual-chairmanship scheme not completely embraced by even some Democratic senators.

In terms of issues, House Speaker Joe Souki (D, Wailuku) and Senate leaders say their most significant challenge is the state's continuing budget problems.

Legislators must cover a nearly \$100 million budget shortfall that's certain to grow since Gov. Ben Cayetano is willing to give unionized government workers modest pay raises.

"The budget will be the cloud over the session," Souki admits.

But balancing the budget is only the short-term problem. Say and House Minority Leader Gene Ward (R, Hahaione Valley), who also sits on Finance, concur that the long-term solution to the fiscal woes rests in finding ways to stimulate the economy.

Chastened by November's elections that claimed the chairpeople of the Senate's three most powerful committees and nearly took down Senate President Norman Mizuguchi (D, Aiea) and Souki, Democrat leaders in both House and Senate are talking about acting early on a significant issue that has been unfinished business.

The key issues

Here are the major issues confronting the 1997 Legislature:



Budget shortfall: Significant budget shortfalls continue to plague the state. Lawmakers must find ways to cover the latest shortfall of nearly \$100 million, which will worsen with any pay increases for unionized government workers.



Economic revitalization: Since Cayetano and legislative leaders are promising no increase in the personal income tax and the 4 percent general excise tax, they will be seeking ways to stimulate the economy to generate more revenue.



Automobile insurance: Once more, legislators will try to craft a bill that lowers the high cost of auto insurance in Hawaii.



Same-sex marriage: For the third time in four years, the Legislature will wrestle with whether same-sex marriages should be permitted.



Reform of the legislative pension perk: Legislators appear ready to eliminate the so-called "high-three" perk. It boosts retirement salaries of county and state lawmakers and judges but is not available to regular government workers.



Juvenile crime: Lawmakers are poised to pass tough measures against young offenders, including giving judges the discretion to have youths as young as 14 tried as adults.



Prisons: Lawmakers will consider Cayetano's proposal to spend about \$11 million to add 1,000 beds to the state prison system, in part by using tent-like structures.



Hawaiian affairs: Issues that have budgetary implications for the state are the key concerns. A main one: the debate over how to define what constitutes the 20 percent revenue from ceded lands that the state must pay to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs to benefit native Hawaiians.

Unfinished business

The easiest, Democrats say, is a measure eliminating the so-called "high-three" pension perk for lawmakers that civil servants don't get. Or it could be a measure drastically reducing Hawaii's high automobile insurance rates, perhaps by as much as 35 percent. Passage of an auto insurance reform bill, Souki predicts, shouldn't be a problem.

Foes of same-sex marriage also want their issue resolved early. "If it lingers, it could be a repeat of last year. It won't go away," warns Linda Rosehill, a lobbyist against homosexual unions.

"If they do not get to it, they won't get to other issues."

House Judiciary Chairman Terrance Tom (D, Kaneohe) says he intends to reintroduce his measure calling for the public to vote on a proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages.

Chumbley says he and his Senate Judiciary co-chairman, Matt Matsunaga (D, Palolo), are crafting a same-sex bill they hope can accommodate what has been the House and Senate positions: allowing a vote on a constitutional amendment that would "preserve traditional marriage" between a man and a woman, that would also honor the economic rights of gays. "We don't want to use limiting or discriminating language," Chumbley says.

Get tough on crime

Tom and Chumbley agree that a tougher stand has to be taken against juvenile crime, a growing problem. Tom will be introducing a bill that gives judges the discretion of having youths as young as 14 tried as adults when accused of heinous crimes. Another measure would allow residents of a community to know the identity of a convicted sex offender who moves into their neighborhood.

In the House, Souki and others are fearful the Senate's committee co-chairmanships, intended to enhance collaboration, could fail and tarnish the entire Legislature.

"I hope it works," Souki adds. "What is important is that we come to agreements. The public doesn't care if it is the House's fault or the Senate's fault. The public will just say the Legislature failed. We all catch the hell."

Dual chairs in Senate

A critic of co-chairmanships, Senate Minority Leader Whitney Anderson (R, Kailua), notes that the Senate leadership panel charged with refereeing disputes between committee co-chairs has four members. "What happens when there's a tie?" he asks.

But for Senate Co-Majority Leader Les Ihara Jr. (D, Kaimuki), architect of the dual chairmanship plan, the beauty of it is that it does put pressure on lawmakers to work together. "The new political culture is collaboration," Ihara insists.

In the past, legislative action was controlled by a small clique of lawmakers, Ihara says. "Before, it was who had the best strategist, who made the best ploys and maneuvers. That is what the public is fed up with," he says.

So last year the public was justified in voting out people like former Sens. Milton Holt and Donna Ikeda, who controlled much of the action, Ihara adds. Now, he asserts, "All are to blame if we fail."

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