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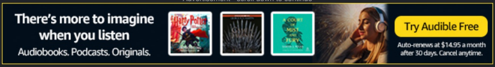
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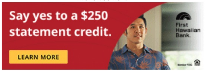
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HAWAII NEWS

Hawaii GOP hopes era of cooperation leads to new laws

By Dan Nakaso
Feb. 17, 2025
Editors' Picks

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"The new (Republican) members want to work on issues that have a chance of passing and not just use the introduction of bills as some form of grandstanding. They no longer want to be just the party of 'No.'"

Colin Moore

Associate professor, University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization

A handful of House Republican bills have passed out of their initial committee hearings for the first time in a decade, giving Republicans hope that all of the talk this year of cooperation between majority Democrats and minority Republicans in both the House and Senate may be real — and that their ideas could become reality as new state laws.

"I see very positive steps in the right direction, but it takes a long time to change the culture of a building (the state Capitol) that has completely ignored the minority for decades," said Rep. Lauren Matsumoto (R, Mililani-Waipio Acres-Mililani Mauka), leader of the nine-member House Republican caucus.

"This is the most effort I've seen toward truly working toward bipartisan cooperation," she said. "In my entire time in the House, there has never been a caucus bill that's passed out of committee, let alone gotten passed out by the Legislature. I remain optimistic."

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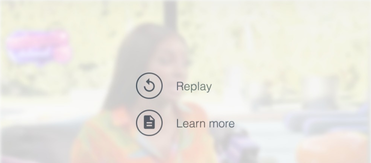
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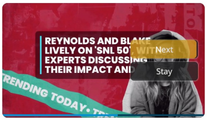
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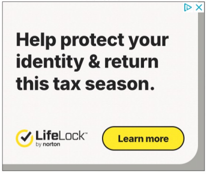
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Proof of a new bipartisan era will come if any Republican caucus bills that remain alive survive the legislative process and get signed into law by Gov. Josh Green.

Some House Republicans believe warmer relations are being offered to Republicans this session because of a variety of factors including:

Greater communication and outreach from new House Speaker Nadine Nakamura; a consensus on the need to further help struggling working-class residents by continuing to make it easier to afford to live in Hawaii; and, possibly, President Donald Trump's landslide election victory, which may have sent a message to blue states like Hawaii.

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But political analyst Neal Milner believes that the real reason driving Democratic cooperation with Republicans comes from both parties' renewed focus on helping island residents with meat-and-potato affordability issues that continue to drive isle residents to less expensive states.

"It isn't how popular Trump is here," Milner said. "What Trump has done elsewhere doesn't make a difference in this situation."

Instead, Republicans this year — with some exceptions — have introduced bills that seem more in agreement with the Democratic majority, which also has taken a new attitude toward issues like streamlining Hawaii's building permitting process, which adds to the already high cost of construction and therefore sales prices, said Colin Moore, who teaches public policy at the University of Hawaii and serves as associate professor at the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization.

Moore called the permitting process "broken" and the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands waitlist "a disgrace."

Republicans have advocated for years to reform both issues, while Democratic thinking, more recently, "has shifted," Moore said.

Fixing the permitting process "would have been a relatively foreign idea to the Democratic caucus a decade ago," he said. "Now they talk about it openly as one of the possible solutions" to speeding up construction of affordable housing and lowering costs.

Hawaii Republicans also have long advocated for reducing taxes and more recently removing the state general excise tax on food, medicine and dental expenses, along with other ways to reduce Hawaii's cost of living.

With notable exceptions, the House minority caucus under Matsumoto this year has introduced "a pragmatic series of bills — and Democrats have gotten the message," Moore said.

"Others, like the 'Stand Your Ground bill (HB 291),' probably have little chance of passing and are a little closer to the MAGA agenda," Moore said. "I don't think there's ever been a huge amount of support on some of the Republican culture war issues.

"The new (Republican) members want to work on issues that have a chance of passing and not just use the introduction of bills as some form of grandstanding," Moore said. "They no longer want to be just the party of 'No.' They want to be able to say to their constituents, 'We can move legislation, too.' So for Republicans, there's a lot of incentive for them to work together with Democrats."

Over in the Senate, veteran Democratic state lawmaker Les Ihara (D, Palolo-Kaimuki-Moiliili) rose on the Senate floor for Tuesday's "moment of contemplation" and told his Democratic and Republican colleagues, "In Hawaii, in this Capitol building, which I've spent most of my adult life here, I feel a spirit of collaboration like never before. It's like a new culture."

Senate Minority Leader Brenton Awa (Kaneohe- Laie-Mokuleia) remains skeptical that Democrats' outreach to his three- member caucus will produce results.

After listening to Ihara's remarks Tuesday, Awa said Ihara "has a good feeling about collaboration."

But the practical reality, Awa said, has been that — just barely a month into the legislative session — Senate Democrats have stalled all five bills introduced by the Republican caucus.

One of the bills that appears dead, SB 1, which Awa introduced, would have prohibited foreign parties from owning agricultural land in Hawaii.

A similar bill — the latest version of SB 242 — remains alive in the Senate.

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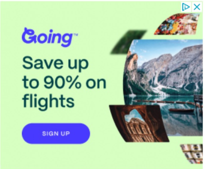
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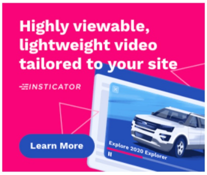
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It also was introduced by Awa but also by two Democrats: Mike Gabbard (Kapolei-Makakilo-Kalaelo), who often skews toward conservative issues, and Sharon Moriwaki (Waikiki- Ala Moana-Kakaako).

Republican bills often have good ideas that sometimes get folded further into the legislative process so Democrats can take the credit, Moore said, "because if you're an elected official and your bill gets through (the Legislature), that's about as good as it gets."

This year the House Republican Caucus introduced 18 bills.

Bills that cleared their initial committee hearings include:

>> The latest version of HB 295, which would allow beneficiaries on the DHHL waitlist who die to be replaced on the waitlist by relatives who are at least one-fourth Native Hawaiian.

>> The latest version of HB 288, which would authorize the Department of Education to use alternative vehicles for student transportation to help prevent a repeat of the abrupt stoppage of school bus service before the start of fall classes, which happened over the past two school years.

>> The latest version of HB 286, which would increase "the maximum annual deduction for contributions to, and maximum account levels for, individual housing accounts."

But most of the others introduced by the minority caucus already appear dead.

They include:

>> HB 291, the "Stand Your Ground" proposal, which would remove "the requirement to retreat or surrender possessions prior to using deadly force."

>> HB 298, which would ask voters to consider a constitutional amendment requiring term limits on state legislators of 12 years. The Legislature remains the only elected body in Hawaii that does not have term limits.

>> HB 284, which would impose a "shot clock" on counties by requiring them to grant building permits within 60 days "if the application is stamped and certified by a licensed engineer and architect and other certain conditions are met."

>> HB 287, which proposed that voters be allowed to vote on another constitutional amendment, to create local school boards across the state.

>> And HB 289, which would ban cellphone use in schools, with some exceptions such as emergencies.

Moore agrees with Awa that Republicans should remain guarded that better communication will result in Republican victories this year.

"I don't think the Democrats are looking to do Republicans any favors," Moore said.

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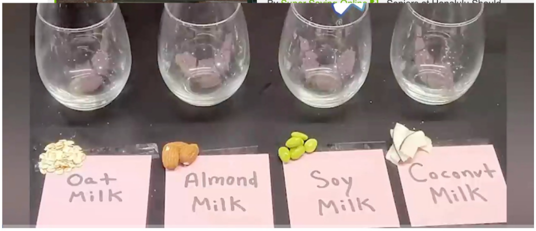

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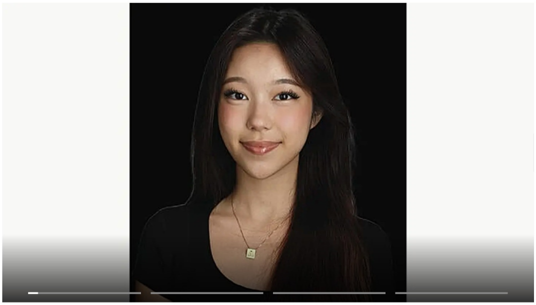

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