



LEGISLATIVE Update

STATE REP. GENE WARD

Protecting East O'ahu Residents Is The Main Priority

In 2022, a former — and currently incarcerated — state lawmaker boldly said, “I can kill a bill anytime I want to.” And the worst part? He wasn’t wrong. This practice prevails in the Hawai‘i state Capitol and needs to be reformed before more corruption occurs at the detriment of our East O’ahu residents.

Suffrage in committees is limited to the chairperson who decides whether to take a vote on the bills. If the chairperson doesn’t like a bill, they will say it is “deferred,” meaning it is dead, not to be considered again in the session unless so indicated.

The spirit of control from the House leadership starting from the speaker, to the majority leader and down through committee chairs is where the accumulation of power has reached great heights, and a single individual anywhere in that food chain has the authority to decide to no longer move a piece of legislation forward.

This practice has impacted a matter close to home for East O’ahu, specifically regarding the Luana Kai Senior Living Project planned for Kalama Valley. In 2021, our Legislature approved \$500 million in bond funding for the project.



State Rep. Gene Ward speaks during a committee hearing.

PHOTO COURTESY THE OFFICE OF STATE REP. GENE WARD

This year, I introduced HB461 to remove this funding source and end the project in our community. However, the bill died because of a single chair’s decision that the

measure was unnecessary, and therefore not placed on an agenda before the deadline for its second public hearing.

Another example is the recent hearing on term limits,

during which a vast majority of the public expressed support for. At the recent hearing, 49 testimonies were in support while four were in opposition. Yet, in its first hearing, the bill was killed by the committee chair without taking a vote. Committee members were never given the opportunity to state their stance on record, and this measure may have passed based upon their shared past opinions.

There’s an old saying: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It is perhaps naïve to think those who benefit from the present system will be the

ones to change it. The recommendations of the commission to improve the standards of conduct are a good start, but to succeed, pressure must also come from the outside.

Our legislature has seemed to forget that power rests not in our committee chairs, but in our people. Every bill should be heard, be subject to public testimony and offered a vote by all committee members.

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