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“We Can’t Furlough the Elections”

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The clock is ticking: We are now only ten months away from the September 2010 Primary Election and eleven and a half months away from the big 2010 General Election. Potential candidates are having fundraisers or testing the waters while political junkies are getting excited speculating on the possibilities and the final outcomes, captivated by the unfolding drama.

Amidst all this, we’ve got a looming problem: Will we be ready to actually hold an election?

We citizens normally take for granted that the elections will just happen, but it’s become painfully clear that Hawaii is NOT ready for a smooth election in 2010.

Several months ago, Hawaii’s Chief Election Officer Kevin Cronin began sounding the alarm that his office does not have the resources he needs to fund various positions, contracts, supplies (like ballots!) and basic operations. The administration was firm—the Office of Elections would not be exempted from the same budget cuts suffered by all of the government agencies and departments. In lieu of employee furloughs, an equivalent sum was taken from the budget. To make matters worse, four staff members have left since the 2008 elections. These vital, permanent positions need to be filled immediately and the people trained. Likewise, 15 seasonal staff members need to be hired and trained. The money saved from the absent four staff members is being used to pay for the office’s basic operating expenses at present.

Then, in a Senate Ways & Means informational briefing in September, various stumbles by Mr. Cronin led Senators Donna Kim and Gary Hooser to declare they had no confidence in him. Next, at an Elections Commission meeting in mid-October, all four County Clerks made an unusual joint appearance to voice their dissatisfaction with Mr. Cronin’s lack of collaboration in preparing for 2010.

Just last week, Mr. Cronin released a new plan for the closing of 97 precincts (out of a total of 339 statewide) – a dramatic cut that would send many voters to new, possibly less convenient locations to cast their ballot. That same day, Mr. Cronin announced his resignation effective December 31, leaving the Office of Elections without a chief just 10 months before the primary.

Meanwhile, complicating all of this, the Office of Elections has been caught up in several legal battles since 2008. After one vendor, Hart Intercivic, was awarded a multi-year contract to provide voting machines (at a cost of more than double the bid of competitor ES&S), the

Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs ordered that the contract awarded to Hart be modified to be made applicable to the 2008 elections only. A new Request for Proposals for the 2010 elections was prepared and sent to interested parties. However, due to a separate court decision, the Office of Elections has been ordered to adopt new administrative rules and now the new Request for Proposals is on hold. The administrative rules have been drafted and a public hearing was held this week.

In sum: It's a mess, and we have ten months to Primary Election Day. It's time to get our act together. We have been watching this unfold and, in our best estimation, we believe the following actions need to be taken ASAP.

#1 - The Elections Commission needs to actually do their job and fulfill their responsibilities. The Elections Commission is a nine-member body responsible for hiring, firing, and advising the Chief Elections Officer. To date, the Commissioners have shown little urgency in addressing the budgetary and operational issues. Now, following the resignation of Mr. Cronin, they need to appoint an interim and then permanent elections officer. They also ought to take an active role in lobbying the Governor and legislature for resources, and actively seek out feedback, expertise, and any other possible assistance from the community to help pave the way to 2010.

#2 - Governor Lingle and her administration need to take serious steps to ensure that the Office of Elections has the proper funding and authorizations to fill the numerous critical positions that are now empty. Four important permanent positions and 15 seasonal positions may end up going unfilled. To date, the administration has not taken steps to ensure the Office of Elections has the staffing and operational funds it desperately needs. Mr. Cronin's latest plan proposes using federal Help America Vote Act funds to fill some critical spots, and the administration should authorize that to be done immediately.

#3 - Legislators need to get serious about elections. The Ways & Means informational briefing was a useful step in shedding light on this problem, and the legislature should continue doing its research and putting pressure on the Office of Elections, Elections Commission, and administration to implement real solutions. Also, the legislature should help the Office of Elections' budget by simply loosening the existing budget provisos that are restricting how the office can allocate its limited funds.

#4 – Citizens need to speak up about the closing of precincts. Will this discourage voting? Will the Office of Elections have the resources to inform voters about the closed polling places and the alternatives of absentee voting and early walk-in voting? It's important for all of us to voice our concerns to the Office of Elections, Elections Commission, and elected officials now, while there is still some time to plan.

#5 – All of us need to seriously consider the value of our democratic form of government and support the electoral process appropriately. While this year is an extreme case, it is worth mentioning that a cash-strapped Office of Elections is not unusual. Year after year, the office

gets by with a very modest budget, and never seems to have enough funds to engage in any serious efforts to increase and improve voting in Hawaii.

Improving voter participation is everyone's responsibility. Government can help by allocating additional resources for informational literature, voting demonstrations, and sample ballots. Businesses, schools, and community organizations can provide voter registration opportunities and sponsor election forums or events. Most importantly, individual citizens must encourage their friends, family, and coworkers to vote and consider taking the bigger step of serving as poll workers or election observers. In 2008 Hawaii was dead last in the nation in voter turnout, and it is everyone's kuleana to change that in 2010.

Elections are the very foundation of our democracy, the main venue for citizens to shape their government. For many individuals, elections are the only time they give direct input to the government and voice their opinion on what Hawaii's future should look like. We have just ten months to the primary and less than twelve months until the general. Let's all work quickly together to ensure that we are ready to count those voices — lest we find ourselves once again the subject of shameful national headlines, having disrespected and squandered our precious democracy.