



ISLAND MATTERS *Mufi Hannemann*

Stronger Marketing Could Boost Tourism

Billy V, Hawai'i News Now broadcaster and ringmaster extraordinaire for in-game activities for University of Hawai'i athletics, recently sent me a note lamenting the state of the economy of Hawai'i Island.

He put it eloquently: "Since 1983, Pele has pretty much ruled the weather of Hawai'i Island. Vog and haze were a regular part of everyday life. I graduated from Konawaena High School that year. I remember going outside of my parents' driveway at 6:30 a.m. near Kailua-Kona town and letting out a breath of air, and watching it come out of

my nose and mouth before it would disappear. The mornings were cool and crisp.

"There were resorts up and down the Kona Coast that were filled with people ... Of course, things have changed with newer, bigger resorts, but Hawai'i Island has taken hits on tourism and some of that (is) weather-related ..."

With the volcanic activity now subsided, Billy suggested a substantive campaign to jump-start the island's lagging tourism economy. Similarly, readers of this column will recall that on several occasions I've called for Hawai'i Tourism Authority to launch

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Aside from hotels, hit equally hard have been farmers, suppliers, transportation companies, visitor attractions and the many other businesses that depend on a steady stream of travelers.

Now that Volcanoes National Park has reopened, visitors can see the wonders of the earth and how these islands came to be. There are the sunshine and blue waters of Kona, the splendor of the Kohala Coast, charm of Hilo, activities galore in Waimea, great food and locally grown products, scenic beauty, won-

derful people wherever you go — and you know I'm going to plug the Punalu'u Sweetbread Bakeshop and Visitors Center in Nā'ālehu, where I used to reside.

We'll be seeing new leadership at HTA shortly. I trust the new head will be an experienced industry leader who knows how the visitor industry operates, understands the competitive marketplace and crafts plans that enable us to thrive, and that includes revitalizing the Hawai'i Island economy with an aggressive creative marketing campaign.

Billy, an avid sports fan, recognizes that it's difficult for

a team to make up lost ground, to come from behind. That's the predicament for Hawai'i Island's visitor industry, and it will take a concerted effort to make up for the big losses of the past months and the inevitable dip that we are starting to see signs of now, but it has to be done.

Funding Public Education

The Hawai'i Supreme Court has invalidated a proposed constitutional amendment that would have asked voters to grant the Legislature authority to impose a surcharge on investment property to support public education. On

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the surface, it sounded like a motherhood-and-apple-pie issue. But a closer examination revealed the proposal, albeit well-intentioned, was problematic from the outset.

From the hospitality industry's perspective, the original proposal included another tax on the hotel industry. Given that the hotel room tax had been hiked just a year before to fund the city's rail project, we pushed to have that wording omitted from the final bill. It was, thanks to the House.

I know firsthand that property taxes are a county's biggest source of revenue. If the state government began taking a slice of that money pie, then counties would face the unpleasant prospect of cutting services or raising

property taxes, or both.

One justice asked the state attorney general, who was pleading the Legislature's case, if it was a possibility the Legislature could use this amendment to raise property taxes for homeowners. The AG admitted he thought it was a possibility.

Setting property tax rates and collecting revenues have long been county prerogatives. Approval of this amendment would represent a serious incursion into county home rule. To dictate to the counties that they should help fund public education when they have no authority over the school system is a classic historical example of "taxation without representation."

Despite what proponents

claimed, this was not an immediate fix. Speaker Scott Saiki stated it could take as long as two years to develop the final legislation — and there's no telling what this tax would look like after it emerges from that process.

This issue will surely be back next session. I hope there will not be another attempt to levy a tax on the backs of the tourism industry, especially since there are signs that the fourth quarter is softening, which is sure to carry over into 2019. No question everyone is in full support of funding a quality public school education for our keiki — the question is which state funding source should it come from?

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What are Tommy's Initial Priorities?

Fixing a dysfunctional Council

Working **TOGETHER** rather than against each other to effectively bring real solutions to our community whether it's paving our roads or fighting monster homes.

Communication

Return phone calls and emails **PROMPTLY** and **TREAT ALL CONSTITUENTS WITH RESPECT.**

Homelessness

Real solutions rather than short term fixes. Public sidewalks, bus stops, and parks should be **CLEAN AND ENJOYED BY ALL** while treating people with **DIGNITY AND RESPECT.**

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