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Council members push for openness

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LIHU'E, Kaua'i — Two Kaua'i County Council members, backed by a citizens' petition, are prodding the state's smallest county to "move into the 21st century" and post more government information online.

Tim Bynum and Lani Kawahara began posting some Kaua'i County Council documents on their independent Web site, kauaiinfo.org, shortly after writing June 3 editorial opinion pieces in The Garden Island newspaper seeking more openness in government.

More than four months later — and more than two years after Bynum first brought up the issues — the mavericks are claiming progress in their quest for equality among council members and better public access to information.

Kawahara calls the posting of council and committee meeting minutes on the county's official Web site since July 3 "a major accomplishment."

The state's other three counties — Hawai'i, Maui and Honolulu — all post more detailed information online about their respective council operations than Kaua'i and have been doing so for at least five years. The state Legislature has been increasingly posting legislative information online since 1999 and the state Senate went "paperless" two years ago.

Kaua'i County Mayor Bernard Carvalho's administration offers a significant amount of information about government services online and is adding more with an initiative dubbed "County Government in Your Living Room."

It's online access to council documents — bills, resolutions and ordinances — that is lagging on Kaua'i's Web site.

Although Hawai'i's open records law doesn't require online posting of government documents, it only makes sense to do so, said Bev Keever, a professor emerita of journalism at the University of Hawai'i.

"The taxpayer has already paid for minutes of the meeting, which are required under open meetings law," Keever said. The minutes are created on a computer and stored digitally. "With the push of a button or a little bit more expertise, that could easily be brought to the public" via the Internet, she said.

"Why wouldn't it be, certainly, to the public's interest or also to the council's interest?" Keever asked.

The effort on Kaua'i "has been absolutely worth it," Bynum said. "We've made important progress. It's not complete, but it's moving in the right direction," he said.

Bynum and Kawahara worked quietly behind the scenes seeking these changes at first — Bynum for more than two years and Kawahara since taking office in December. But their efforts met "a stone wall," Bynum said.

Bynum said Council Chairman Bill "Kaipo" Asing rebuffed his efforts to get bills on the council

agenda. Asing declined requests to comment for this article.

When Bynum and Kawahara went public with their concerns, more than 400 people signed an online petition backing them.

"In the 21st century, we need more — not less — openness in all the processes of our local government," Kaua'i resident Frederic Wyle wrote on the open-government petition supporting Kawahara and Bynum.

Jay Furfaro, the vice chairman of the council, played a conciliatory role in council discussions of the issues, which finally came to a head in long, emotion-charged meetings on July 22 and Aug. 5. Furfaro called for more openness and for decorum among council members.

Online services for Kaua'i residents include paying property taxes and sewer bills (since 2006), signing up for civil defense alerts via phone or e-mail, and registering motor vehicles (both in 2009). Other counties offer similar services.

Among the state's four counties, Bynum and Kawahara speak with reverence of Honolulu's Web site as "the gold standard." There, Internet users can find council minutes, agendas and public testimony, plus MP3 audio files and video recordings of meetings.

Honolulu and Maui have been posting their council business online since 2004 and the Big Island since 2000. All have retroactively posted some older council documents online as they have time. The Big Island has posted all ordinances dating back to 1905.

"The more input the public have beforehand, it's better for decision-makers," Keeever said. "There are a lot of people that have some really good ideas."

Suzanne Marinelli, director of the Public Access Room at the state Capitol, said that in her 14 years helping Hawai'i residents gain a voice at the Legislature, she's seen a trend toward more information online.

Asing has given no public indication of when, or even if, Kaua'i County will eventually post bills, resolutions or ordinances online.

West Kaua'i resident and former council candidate Bruce Pleas said he looks forward to being able to download bills and other documents at home, instead of driving to Lihu'e for paper copies of pending legislation.

Said Marinelli: "The people who participate in government shouldn't be only those who can afford the gas money."



COUNCIL DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION AVAILABLE ONLINE, BY COUNTY

	AGENDAS	MINUTES	RESOLUTIONS	BILLS	ORDINANCES	AUDIO & VIDEO RECORD OF MEETINGS
HAWAII	✓	✓*	✓	✓	✓	✗
HONOLULU	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
KAUAI	✓	✓**	✗	✗	✗	✗
MAUI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗

*Summary form, not transcript
Source: county websites and clerks

**Since July 3, both transcript and summary

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