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LATE TESTIMONY

TESTIMONY OF GLEN TAKAHASHI
CITY CLERK, CITY AND COUNTY OF HONOLULU
TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY AND LABOR
ON SENATE BILL NO. 2496
RELATING TO ELECTIONS

February 2, 2016

Chair Keith-Agaran and Committee members:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Senate Bill 2496. The purpose of this bill is to provide a framework for vote by mail elections in Hawaii. The Office of the City Clerk generally supports voting by mail and is willing to work with the Committee to craft legislation that ensures a fair and tidy administrative election scheme.

We reiterate our comments made on Senate Bill 2116 regarding ballot mailing dates and post-election signature error correction process as similarly relevant to this measure. However, we do note that the bill's author did include a provision specifying that ballots are to be mailed no earlier than 30 days prior to the election. Thirty days prior to the election serves as the voter registration deadline (for new registrants and for address updates) and hence our office would mail ballot packets closer to twenty days prior to the election if exercising the discretion provided in the bill.

We have questions concerning the proposed "voter service centers" as noted in this measure and SB2496. The voter service centers appear to feature the same services as absentee walk in voting polling sites, namely, in person voting opportunities, disabled accessible voting machines, voter registration services, and ballot replacement services. The voter service centers also appear to have similar starting and ending dates as absentee polling locations.

Finally, unless it is specifically intended that the State would conduct vote-by-mail activities for elections involving county offices exclusively, we note that page 18, lines 14 provides:

"The State is responsible for preparing, mailing, receiving, and tabulating mail ballots, even in elections where there are no federal or state office on the ballot."
[emphasis added]

Unless specifically intended, a technical amendment striking the words "mailing" and "receiving" from this paragraph would resolve an apparent conflict with earlier provisions that designate the County Clerk as the entity to mail and receive vote-by-mail ballot packets. We would then interpret the phrase to mean that the State would conduct ballot tabulation activities for all elections regardless of whether it is administered exclusively by the Counties. However, please note that under existing policies/practices, the County Clerk is also responsible for vote tabulation activities for county elections not held in conjunction with the regular elections.

As drafted, this bill provides a workable framework for a vote by mail election scheme. We do have concerns regarding the resources required for the administration of voter service centers, and the total shift of responsibility/costs for servicing voters to the Counties. However, we will comment further in testimony for SB2296 which is much more prescriptive in that regard.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on SB 2496.