

Senate President Donna Mercado Kim
2014 Regular Session Opening Day Remarks
January 15, 2014

Because Hawaii is a special place.

The year was 1982. It was my first time running for office, and that was the Democratic Party's campaign slogan: *Because Hawaii is a Special Place.*

This timeless expression captures why many of us chose public service... To ensure that Hawaii continues to be a special place for everyone.

Aloha and welcome to the 27th Legislature's opening day. While we're keeping with our recent practice of treating this first day of the biennium session as a regular working day, we're making it a special day by welcoming back to these chambers 33 former Senators.

It's wonderful that they've been able to join us to celebrate the 55th anniversary of statehood, and we'll be introducing them later in the agenda.

At the conclusion of last year's session, I urged Senate members to use the interim to follow-up on issues we were unable to address during the regular session, or to initiate projects that would give us a head start on the pressing issues we'd be facing this year.

And they delivered.

As one example, genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, will be a topic of considerable debate. And so Agriculture Committee Chair Clarence Nishihara spent the interim gathering the most current, objective information to enable legislators to separate fact from misinformation to guide us in our decision-making.

Commerce and Consumer Protection Committee Chair Roz Baker has been evaluating the progress of the Affordable Care Act and the Hawaii Health Connector, with an eye toward ensuring it meets the needs of consumers and businesses, as mandated.

The committee has also been devising the means to ensure that utility customers installing photovoltaic systems don't face unnecessary delays in connecting to the electric grid, and help accelerate our move away from fossil fuels.

Chair Donovan Dela Cruz and his Economic Development, Government Operations, and Housing Committee are helping shape the rejuvenation of Whitmore Village in Central Oahu and collaborating with the film industry to bring more production to West Oahu.

Chairman Mike Gabbard and the Energy and Environment Committee are tackling the difficult task of stopping the spread of invasive species, one of the greatest threats to our natural

resources, by developing a comprehensive strategy to bolster the state's response to this huge challenge.

Human Services Committee Chair Suzanne Chun Oakland is reaching the needy by partnering with the Homeless Assistance Working Group to develop a mechanism to identify property for temporary and permanent housing for the homeless. Members are also focusing on our growing population of seniors and how the state can best serve them.

Our small boat harbors, state parks, conservation lands, and shorelines seem to be in constant need of upkeep, and so Water & Land Committee Chair Malama Solomon has been assessing the facilities and programs of the Department of Land and Natural Resources to identify what the Legislature can do to support that agency's mandates.

The Ways and Means Committee, as always, has the Herculean task of balancing the state's many and diverse needs with our financial resources. Chair David Ige, along with Vice Chair Michelle Kidani, led site visits throughout the state, seeing first-hand the capital improvement needs.

There are other issues as well.

Last year, with Education Chair Jill Tokuda taking the lead, we took a first step toward universal early education, and I expect the debate will continue as we examine the costs of expanding publically funded preschool education, including how it will impact our current mandate for kindergarten through 12th grade, and the feasibility of its long-term sustainability.

At the other end of the educational spectrum, Higher Education Chair Brian Taniguchi held hearings with the University of Hawaii on its proposed repair and maintenance budget estimated at \$480 million, added to new construction projects totaling about \$200 million. Given the similar needs of public schools and other state infrastructure, there will be many requests competing for a limited amount of capital improvement money.

With a push toward more geothermal energy, we expect there will be proposals to limit or restrict its use, or the methods used in its extraction and generation.

And we'll be revisiting the proposal to raise the minimum wage.

The Senate looks forward to working collaboratively again with our House counterparts, and I'm pleased that we have a joint House/Senate legislative package. While there will be plenty of areas where we may disagree, it's important for us to work collaboratively in the best interests our constituents and all the people of this state.

What I've just summarized is not a comprehensive list of everything the Senate has accomplished during the past several months, but it does provide ample evidence that we were very engaged during the interim, and that we worked toward getting a jump-start on the session.

Much of what we have and will accomplish, we can attribute to those who came before us. We are building a foundation created by those who served, debated, and deliberated in these very halls and chambers, and who we honor today.

And we honor them on a milestone in our history: the 55th anniversary of Statehood.

These men and women are responsible for so much of the progress we have come to enjoy. Their contributions are many and enduring.

I speak of the Hawaii Prepaid Healthcare Act that mandated health insurance coverage for workers.

We were the first state in the nation to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

Our public schools and the University of Hawaii system have given our people knowledge and the confidence to go out and build a better world.

We have a strong visitor industry, led by the Hawaii Tourism Authority, that is the envy of competing destinations.

We were, and continue to be, pioneers in the use of renewable energy, including solar and geothermal power, while protecting our fragile natural resources.

Each successive Legislature adopted changes that contributed to helping make our legislative process more transparent open. Little by little, a more open and democratic process emerged. More recent Legislatures embraced technology to give people greater opportunities to be heard, to be involved, and to understand what we do.

There are so many other examples of the good work that our predecessors accomplished. It surrounds us, affects our lives, and is captured in part in our commemorative yearbook which will be our gift to you today.

But even more remarkable than their legislative accomplishments was their collaboration, despite differences in upbringing, personalities, values, district and constituent priorities, and internal political alliances and policies. They managed to put aside those differences, to compromise and collaborate, so the work of the Legislature could proceed, the people could be served, and Hawaii could be a special place.

This is not to say that our work is done. It never is. But I can say that the inspiration these men and women have given us, through their leadership and aloha for the islands and our people, have guided and shaped the most special place on earth: our home, our Hawaii.

Mahalo.