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Editorial | Our View

Clean energy short-circuited by legislators

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Next year is the second half of the two-year legislative cycle, so bills could pick up where they left off. But residents — engaged voters in an election year — must insist that clean energy goes beyond campaign talk, and that policy-making politicians walk the walk.

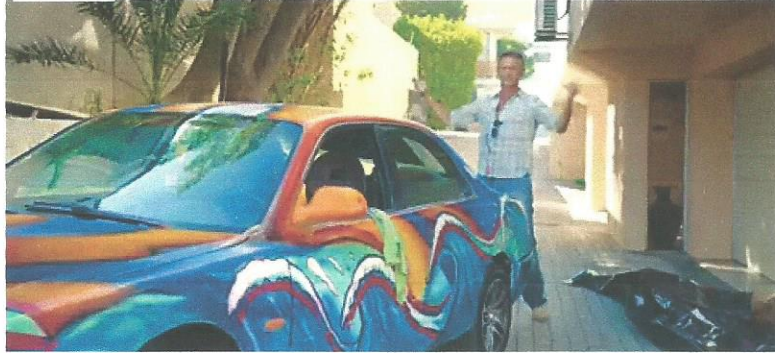
When NextEra Energy's bid to take over Hawaiian Electric Co. failed last summer, it seemed Hawaii was re-energized to reclaim its own fuel destiny, to build on its laudable law to reach 100 percent renewable power by 2045. Unfortunately, in the just-ended legislative session, worthy initiatives fizzled — a discouraging loss of momentum when statewide energy policy surely could have used it.

“The Legislature didn’t advance any meaningful legislation that reflects the speed and scale of progress we need to achieve our 100 percent renewable energy future,” lamented Jeff Mikulina, executive director of Blue Planet Foundation.

Sadly, he’s right. Among the major disappointments:

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>> **House Bill 1580**, which would have set a 2045 target achieving 100 percent renewable ground transportation, such as electric vehicles. That goal, involving neither money nor punitive mandate, was an aspirational one that sought to align transportation planning goals with the existing green energy law.

>> **HB 1253** and **SB 155**, which would have set targets for renewable gas by 2045 so that natural gas would be included in the state’s trek to 100 percent renewable.

>> **SB 1121**, which would have closed the gas loophole in Hawaii’s solar water heater requirement. This time-sensitive bill had direct relevance to huge housing developments now underway — Ho’opili, for one — to redirect them away from installing all gas heaters. The bill aimed to clamp an exemption in the state law requiring new homes be built with solar water heaters. Unfortunately, this did not even receive a public hearing in Sen. Lorraine Inouye’s Committee on Transportation and Energy.

In fact, in the past two legislative sessions with Inouye helming Senate energy bills, momentum has stalled. Advancing bills came to screeching stops in the 11th hour, victims of political horse-trading.

Cases in point: Inouye killed two renewable-energy bills — HB 1580 and **Senate Bill 909**, which offered a plan to ensure energy in emergencies — because House Finance Chairwoman Sylvia Luke refused to release funds for **HB 665**. That bill would have reduced the solar energy tax credit amount, but was worthy for allowing energy storage — emerging battery technology — to qualify for the tax credit.

“Unless you make a miracle happen with (HB) 665, you can say goodbye to (HB) 1580,” Inouye told Rep. Chris Lee in the final conference committee on April 28.

Where Hawaii's energy public policy faltered, though, there finally came encouraging steps from the private sector. Tops among them was last month's reboot of three stalled solar-energy projects that would boost Oahu's renewable energy output by 3 percentage points, up from the current 19.4 percent of fuel mix. If approved, HECO's deal with NRG Energy Inc. would see in 2019 the state's largest solar farm, the 49-megawatt Kawailoa Solar near Haleiwa; the 45.9-megawatt Waipio Solar; and the 14.7-megawatt Lanikuhana Solar.

The deal actually improves on an earlier energy buyback pact between HECO and the solar farms' previous developer, the now-defunct SunEdison. It's hoped — expected — that the better terms will benefit ratepayers, who have long endured one of the highest energy costs in the nation.

Also resurrected and encouraging: Wednesday's power-purchasing breakthrough between HELCO and Hu Honua's biomass project on Hawaii island. If the firm's pricing proposal is approved by state regulators, it could resume facility construction late next year toward the goal of delivering firm renewable energy.

As for the Legislature, only a trio of minor energy-climate bills emerged this session: **HB 1578** forms a climate-change task force to find opportunities for carbon sequestration via farming; **SB 559** creates a Hawaii climate-change commission; and **HB 794** creates a revolving fund, but no money, for University of Hawaii green energy programs.

At this critical environmental juncture, minor steps disappoint when bigger strides, wholly possible, weren't taken. Next year is the second half of the two-year legislative cycle, so bills could pick up where they left off. But residents — engaged voters in an election year — must insist that clean energy goes beyond campaign talk, and that policy-making politicians walk the walk.

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