

## Why hold a Con Con?

**Because a Constitutional Convention could allow Hawaii to move from top-down rule to citizen-involved governance**

By Ira Rohter

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While sitting alongside the banks of the Damariscotta Bay, waiting for the 4th of July fireworks to start during our family vacation in Maine this summer, I was reading through the weekly Lincoln County News. With the price of gas and home heating oil doubling from last year, Mainers were struggling with how they would weather the coming cold winter. Yet instead of waiting for the politicians on-high to act, Maine citizens were deeply involved in solving the soaring fuel costs situation themselves, in their own school boards and townships. The paper contained lengthy articles discussing "Damariscotta's first wind turbine"; "Wiscasset board cuts \$253,040 for schools"; "Midnight Oil offers geothermal heating for citizens of Damariscotta-Newcastle"; "Wood Energy Taskforce sets goals." As is the New England tradition, engaged citizens in the 19 small cities and towns making up Lincoln County were handling a variety of issues themselves, directly.

These towns, with the largest being around 2,000 residents, operate under a Selectmen/Town Meeting/Town Manager form of government. The Board of Selectmen serves as the town's executive branch, with Town Meeting serving as the "legislative branch." Typically, five "Selectmen" are elected at large for three-year staggered terms. A "Town Manager" is responsible for providing general management and administrative oversight of all operations, programs and services.

### On the Net:

In a commentary for the Star-Bulletin last year, Ira Rohter described how a Constitutional Convention could be organized. Readers can access his article in the Star-Bulletin online archives at the following Web address:

» [archives.starbulletin.com/2007/05/06/editorial/special.html](http://archives.starbulletin.com/2007/05/06/editorial/special.html)

Hawaii, unfortunately, still operates with power concentrated at the top, in the hands of the governor, state Legislature, and state agencies. County governments, which are closer to the people, have only limited powers, including the capacity to raise taxes to meet local needs. For example, decisions that affect local schools are decided not in

local communities - as in Maine and elsewhere - but by top-down decisions handed down by a crazy quilt-work mix of players, involving the state Board of Education, the Department of Education, the Legislature and the governor.

### **Is reformism good enough?**

Holding a Constitutional Convention - which voters will decide on Nov. 4 - offers the opportunity for its elected delegates to propose change to the way state government operates. Amendments are then voted upon by the public in the next election. The law-making process might be reformed by strengthening sunshine laws and ethics rules for the Legislature, imposing conflicts of interest standards, instigating a full public campaign funding system (Voter Owned Hawaii) to reduce the influence of special interests.

The delegates could propose reforms to restructure the Legislature, to make it more accessible to average citizens, by recommending multi-member districts, holding year-around sessions instead of cramming everything into a four-month period, even going to a unicameral single chamber like our Councils, instead of the cumbersome two bodies we have now, which creates infinite hurdles that must be overcome twice to pass anything significant that bucks the status-quo. But I would argue Hawaii needs not just tinkering, but a major reinventing of how policies are made.

### **We must decentralize government**



For historical reasons, Hawaii is burdened with an obsolete form of government, based on monarchy and plantation-style, top-down rule. This system has shown itself unable to effectively resolve ages-old issues such as restructuring public education, creating affordable rental housing, breaking the hold of endless growth-at-any-cost land development, continued environmental degradation, traffic gridlock on all islands, and a host of issues filling the pages of our newspapers.

It's time to move to citizen-involved governance such as I saw in Maine, and is practiced elsewhere. Con Con amendments could redefine the relationship between state and county-level bodies. These local bodies - including dividing Honolulu into several separate towns - could streamline policy-making and directly engage average citizens in dealing with issues that have remained unsettled after many years.

Most frightening, however, is the inability of the present arrangement of power to prepare islanders for the coming major crises caused by

soaring oil prices (Peak Oil), and, by the next decade, the effects of global climate change on all facets of our lives.

We've already had a taste of a years-long upward trend in oil prices. Knowledgeable experts predict oil costing from \$300-\$500 a barrel by 2012. The world economy is already in serious trouble, as is Hawaii. Without replacement energy sources and conservation - especially for transportation fuels and electricity - we will be in emergency mode. Yet our leaders act as though our future will be mostly a continuation of trends started in the 1970s. The few baby steps they have taken to promote energy and food self-sufficiency demonstrate no sense of urgency or recognition of impending crises affecting the islands from increasing oil prices, climate changes, or resulting economic meltdowns.

Neither the state nor counties, including Honolulu, have formal plans for conservation, use of energy saving mechanisms, an energy strategy, or an office responsible for monitoring and managing costs, unlike mainland cities such as Portland, Phoenix, Philadelphia, Salt Lake, Seattle, and a host of others. Baby-step "actions" at the state level are too incremental - too little, too late.

Hundreds of local communities, however, are organizing themselves - as in Maine - to take effective actions to adapt to soaring energy costs right now - and working on "energy descent plans" for the long term.

Rather than wait for state leaders to "take care of us," a People's Con Con could restructure government in ways that will maximize local initiatives, allowing the creative skills and good will of thousands of island residents to be utilized to collectively solve long-standing problems, and weather a troubled future with good grace.

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