

Additional hospital funds cover half the debt

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Cash infusions for hospitals and changes to how Hawaii runs its state health system are some of the top items a Big Island state senator touted as his 2009 legislative accomplishments.

However, the first of the new appropriations, about \$3.7 million, will pay off only about half of what Kona Community Hospital owes its vendors, Chief Executive Officer Earl Greenia said.

State Sen. Josh Green, D-West Hawaii, said the omnibus health bill that the Legislature approved this session will add \$60 million to Hawaii Health System Corp. appropriations over the next two years, while allowing the state-supported hospitals — which include Kona Community Hospital and Hilo Medical Center — to consider privatization or becoming nonprofits.

That's a step hospital administration can't do without the Legislature giving the hospitals authority, Greenia said.

"It gives us the flexibility to pursue other legal structures, such as nonprofits," he said. "That would allow us to compete for philanthropic money."

As a public hospital, philanthropic

funding sources are not available, he added.

The exact amount coming to Kona Community Hospital through the additional \$60 million appropriation has yet to be calculated. Greenia's best estimate is \$3 million to \$4 million.

The other \$3.7 million appropriation, though it won't pay all the bills, is still "a ray of sunshine for us," Greenia said.

Green described the bills as ways to continue protecting the state's safety net health care system, while allowing the regional hospital boards to look at ways of exiting the system.

"More people need our hospitals," he said. "Our community hospitals are all we've got on the neighbor islands. ... (The money) is meant to preserve the safety net for two years until the community decides where we're going."

He also credited fellow senators and representatives for finding additional money for the hospitals, even as they cut other programs and raided special funds.

The freshman senator defended his votes against bills that would have raised the conveyance tax for high-value properties, taxes on people and small businesses earning more than \$150,000 a year and the transient accommodations tax.

The conveyance tax increase would

affect many real estate transactions in West Hawaii, while higher taxes on those higher earners would have potentially caused more of the district's small businesses to close, he said. He also worried that raising the transient accommodations tax, the tax levied on hotel rooms, would hurt the tourism industry, he said.

Those measures passed; Gov. Linda Lingle vetoed them, and legislators overrode the veto.

Green did support a tobacco tax increase, he said.

Touching on perhaps two of the most controversial items facing legislators this session, Green said he supported, and submitted his own amendments to, legislation that would have created civil unions in Hawaii and that he spoke against a resolution to create Islam Day. Both decisions were related to removing religion from government decisions, he said. Civil unions, according to the language in his amendment, would function as legal recognition for purposes of receiving legal benefits and would apply to heterosexual and homosexual couples. People should still be allowed to have religious ceremonies, he said, and advocated for a distinction between civil unions and marriages. The Islam Day resolution introduced religion into the Legislature, something he cautioned his colleagues to avoid.