



Editorials

Thursday, March 14, 2002

College should be part of welfare system

The issue: Bush's welfare reform plan would affect a Hawaii work and education program.

THE most encouraging program in the state's welfare system allows recipients to combine work with college classes in a way that pulls them through difficult times while preparing them for self-sustaining employment. President Bush's [plan to change welfare requirements will threaten the program](#) unless serious changes are made in his proposal.

The Hawaii program, called Bridge to Hope, is in its second year. Welfare-to-work participants are required to work at least 32 hours a week to receive cash benefits. However, full-time students at the University of Hawaii qualify by combining 20 hours of school and work. Kristine M. Foster, the financial assistance program administrator, calls Bridge to Hope's combination of employment and education "enormously successful."

Bush has proposed increasing combined work requirements from 30 hours to 40 hours a week, including up to 16 hours of education. However, the university allows students to work at on-campus jobs no more than 20 hours a week during the school year. That would make it impossible to meet both university and welfare requirements on campus under the Bush proposal.

The university's requirements are understandable. Welfare recipients were unable to devote adequate amounts of time to school, work and child care unless special considerations were made.

"It was just so clear that people who are working full time and then going to school and have families are just overwhelmed," Teresa Bill, statewide coordinator for Bridge to Hope, told the Star-Bulletin's Treena Shapiro. "People were leaving school so quickly."

The UH program has provided work along with classes so participants can fulfill welfare requirements without leaving campus. The employment includes student assistantships, internships and mentoring opportunities with professors.

The president's proposal to raise work requirements faces opposition in Congress. Republican Sen. Olympia J. Snowe says a recent study in her state of Maine showed that one of the main reasons poor women are unemployed is a lack of available child-care services.

Tommy G. Thompson, secretary of health and human services, favored giving states maximum flexibility in applying welfare-reform measures when he was governor of Wisconsin. He should recognize the value in a program that encourages welfare recipients to gain education needed for the day their welfare benefits run out.

Of the nearly 12,000 families receiving welfare benefits in Hawaii, only 100 participate in the Bridge to Hope program. Any changes in welfare requirements should include exceptions to encourage this and similar efforts to combine education and employment.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

Shuffling funds doesn't add up to more money

The issue: The mayor's budget proposal would transfer sewer funds to cover other expenses.

MAYOR Harris's desire [to shift \\$60 million from the city's sewer fund](#) to balance his \$1.2 billion budget is an ill-conceived proposal in view of the considerable repairs and improvements the aging system requires. The administration's position that the city extend its debt to cover the amount also would be fiscally irresponsible when potential increases in revenues are doubtful.

Harris contends that the \$60 million transfer is justified because \$148 million from the city's general fund was used to pay for waste-water facility construction before a separate sewer account was set up in 1993. Last year, \$41 million from the account was similarly diverted; it is simply repayment, he argues. However, the administration should recognize that whether a fund is labeled "sewer" or "general," all of the money really comes from the same source and there's only so much of it.

The transfer would leave \$48 million in the sewer fund. With improvements -- many of them required by the federal government -- estimated to cost \$1 billion, it would be unwise to further reduce the fund's balance. Much of the city's sewer infrastructure is 60 to 70 years

old and frequent breaks in lines and at waste facilities attest to the need for repairs. Last week, a rupture at the Keehi pump station released about 3 million gallons of raw sewage into the lagoon, a spill city officials described as the largest in years.

The City Council, which had been faulted for being indulgent of Harris and his high-profile projects, recently adopted a more critical posture with John DeSoto as chairman. Last year, when Harris sought an \$83 million supplemental budget, it breezed through the Council virtually unscathed. This time, Ann Kobayashi, the newly elected member who heads the budget committee, appears to be restoring the Council to its proper role as a check of the administration's operations by scrutinizing the mayor's funding request.

Kobayashi, Gary Okino and Romy Cachola, as the only three of the nine Council members eligible for re-election this year, would face the wrath of voters if taxes or sewer fees had to be raised. This is exactly the accountability taxpayers should extract to keep government spending in line.

For Harris, accountability also is tied to the voting booth. Although his attention has been diffused by numerous problems in his campaign for governor, Harris should not forget his mayoral duty to leave the city in sound financial shape before setting sail for other political ports.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

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