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Coconut%20Wireless County Council Limits Public Speaking Time Even More While Real ID Finally Reaches Maui

by Anthony Pignataro

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TIME IS RUNNING OUT

For those of you who pay attention to how the Maui County Council does its business, who stay up on the news and think about the problems-and promise-of the town you live in and who somehow find the time in a busy week (and summon the courage) to visit a County Council hearing and actually speak in front of the dais, audience and television cameras, you will now have even less time to say whatever it is you wish to say. That's right-no more three minute speeches with an additional minute to wrap-up.

That's because on Friday, Jan. 6, the council voted 8-0 (Mike Victorino was excused) to allow council committee chairpersons the ability to set up new, shorter time limits, if there are a lot of citizens who showed up to speak. According to a Maui News story published the next day, councilmembers said that so many people have been showing up to speak on various agenda items that hearings often go into extra innings or the council ends up not having enough time to complete its regularly scheduled business.

I suppose I'm supposed to be sad that our elected officials are further constricting an already narrow path for citizen participation in government, but what's the use? You don't need to attend many county council hearings to conclude that the Public Comment portion is a mere formality-a creaky old ritual that those in power go through so they can say with grave seriousness that they listened to all sides and all opinions before rendering a thoughtful judgment.

This is nonsense. Officials, briefed by staff reports, site visits, confidential legal opinions and personal visits from lobbyists, land-owners and corporate bosses, make their decisions before public hearings, not after. It does not, in the end, matter whether citizens speak for four minutes apiece or three or even one. And this has been true for many years, as this excerpt from the 1985 book *Land and Power in Hawaii* by George Cooper and Gavan Daws shows:

"In 1980 the Honolulu Advertiser reporter on Maui, Edwin I. Tanji [who later became city editor of The Maui News] attended a Planning Commission hearing on Makena Surf," Cooper and Daws wrote. "He noted that of 25 who testified, 23 spoke against the project, but the matter was approved. Tanji concluded that 'if a Maui Planning Commission decision on the Makena Surf condominium project is typical, public testimony in contested case hearings before the commission means nothing.'"

REAL ID REACHES HAWAII

"When a place gets crowded enough to require ID's," sci-fi author Robert A. Heinlein noted in 1973, "social collapse is not far away."

To be very conservative, Heinlein's "social collapse" seems to have occurred in 2005, when the U.S. Congress passed the Real ID Act, one of many post 9/11 national security laws which was promoted as a way to make America safer but in reality amounted to little more than yet another way federal bureaucrats could make everyday transactions more of a hassle. A loose coalition of liberal and libertarian voices denounced the Real ID Act as at best a waste, and at worst a violation of civil liberties: the Cato Institute, American Civil Liberties Union, the AFL-CIO, Gun Owners of America and even the ultra-conservative evangelical Pat Robertson.

The act passed anyway. And now starting March 5, all U.S. citizens, naturalized and native, getting or renewing the Hawaii state driver's license will require even more documentation and paperwork to prove citizenship, reported The Maui News on Jan. 9. Now applicants will need to show a Social Security card as well as a birth certificate or passport or other such documents.

"At some point in the near future, all U.S. citizens will need a compliant Real ID for air travel within the United States," state Department of Transportation spokesman Dan Meisenzahl told the News. "We have to make sure Hawaii and its residents are prepared."

Given that it's taken nearly seven years to get even this far, Meisenzahl's "near future" could be another decade away.

IRONY ALERT!

And now for something completely unexpected. Just one day after our Jan. 5 issue came out, we received two phone calls from irate readers. They were shocked-SHOCKED!-at the content of this week's Overheard, the tiny column that contains a brief quote and the barest identifying details of the speaker, which runs each week in the paper's print version (usually tucked beneath this very column). The quotes, which usually lack context, are often humorous. The Jan. 5 Overheard, however, leaned more towards brutality:

"I feel like a black person at the back of the bus." -Older woman at Wailea Beach, after being denied a front row beach chair, Dec. 30

The quote, even to a casual reader, is appalling. Which is exactly what moved two readers to call us:

"We thought it was in bad taste," said Brian, who identified himself as an African-American and said he would not read the paper anymore because of the quote.

Of course we agree with Brian that the quote is in bad taste. It is disgusting, absurd and insulting, and trivializes the countless brave individuals who bled and died (and still do) in their fight for equality under the law.

But Brian and the other reader have entirely missed the point. Our running the quote was meant to bring attention to the vileness of the quote, and the fact that there are still people out there thinking and saying things like that, not to excuse it.