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OPINION EDITORIAL

By

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I was recently asked what I would consider to be some highlights of this session. I thought about the authorization to purchase Turtle Bay. This was an "out of the box" idea that would preserve our land, our Hawai'i. I also thought about funding the harbor modernization plan. This collaborative plan of the users of state harbors is necessary to meet the growing needs of our state as 98 percent of all goods and materials imported into Hawai'i come through the harbors. I also thought about the legislation mandating ignition interlock systems for DUI offenders. It was an idea that the Administration, Republicans and Democrats all introduced and agreed upon. As passed, these changes will take years, and should instead be implemented much sooner.

Last year, the Legislature collaborated with the Governor on her initiatives to chart a course for our future – developing science, technology, engineering and math skills (STEM), and investing in the creative arts, such as the Music Enterprise Learning Experience (MELE). This year, no such collaboration was evident as funding to expand these successful programs was eliminated from the legislature's final version of the state budget.

2008 is a time when the cost of living in Hawai'i is increasing rapidly. According to statistics released by the Governor's Office in February, average expenses for a family of four living on Oahu have increased in a number of areas since 2002. For the year ending 2007, water and sewer rates have increased by almost 42%, gas prices have increased 87% even accounting for a 1/6th decrease in consumption, electricity rates have jumped approximately 84%, and property taxes have increased by a similar percentage. But even without the statistics, we know our costs of living have increased.

If there was ever a time to provide meaningful tax relief for our citizens, this was it. The Governor proposed \$102 million in tax relief targeted to seniors, families with dependent children and those who provide dependent care. House Republicans introduced measures to eliminate taxes on food, and were supportive of the Governor's tax relief proposals. The only tax relief the legislature passed was a \$1 tax rebate that a taxpayer can claim on their 2008 state tax return . . . in 2009.

Medical liability insurance increased an average of 90% from 2002 to 2006 for life saving specialists. This issue garnered much discussion in the early part of the session, and it is clear from the experience of other states, such as Texas, that reducing the cost of insurance for doctors will reduce the amount of doctors leaving Hawai'i. We have lost 30% of our orthopedic surgeons. There are only two left on the west side of the Big Island. There is only one OB/GYN to service an area from Kahuku to Kaneohe. Moloka'i has none. Maui is the only neighbor island with a neurosurgeon. There are some nights where Oahu has no neurosurgeon on call. And the

reform that doctors and the public openly pleaded for, was killed in the House Judiciary Committee.

While some of these ideas were Republican ideas, some were Democrat ideas or bi-partisan initiatives. But these good ideas did not make the cut. Some would say you can always reintroduce these ideas next year. But what we put off for next year hurts the people of Hawai'i today. Not only does it hit them in their wallets, it may cost someone's life or limb, as was the case in an emergency situation in Maui earlier this year.

As I reflect on what could have been, I am reminded of the importance of our role as the Minority. We owe it to the people of Hawai'i to ensure that the public is heard above the overwhelming political opinion of the Majority. As a legislature, we are responsible for creating public policy that improves the quality of life today, and as one body, we fell short of our duty.