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Lingle promises help for Kaua'i

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LIHU'E, Kaua'i — Gov. Linda Lingle asked Kaua'i businesses to invest in their employees and pledged the state will spend more on public works projects to help ease the impact of the current economic slowdown.

"The economy is top of the mind, wherever you go," Lingle said at a Kaua'i Chamber of Commerce lunch yesterday at the Kaua'i Marriott Resort.

"As business leaders you're all well aware of the economy and what's happening in the world ... particularly the (rising) price of oil and the ripple effect that that's having," Lingle said.

Yet Hawai'i is faring better than many other parts of the country, Lingle said.

"It's true we've been experiencing a moderation of the high rates of growth of the last several years," Lingle said. But there is still growth — a 3.3 percent growth projected for the end of the fiscal year, down from the former projection of 3.9 percent, she said.

Lingle also pointed to Hawai'i's unemployment rate remaining "well below the national average of 5 percent."

"Kaua'i visitor days are up 1 percent for the year, even though there is a 7.5 percent decrease in arrivals," the governor said. People are staying longer, "which is the key factor, because they're spending money every day."

Lingle said a number of state public works projects will help bolster Kaua'i's economy in the next few years and help prepare the island for projected growth of 38 percent by 2035. They include:

- Highway projects of \$86 million in nine upcoming construction projects, including four-lane widening of Kuhio Highway from Kapa'a to Wailua and of Kaumuali'i Highway in Lihu'e.
- Airport improvements worth \$58.2 million, including baggage claim, air-conditioning and parking.
- Nawiliwili Harbor improvements, solar energy projects at the Lihu'e airport and highways base yard, and an energy efficiency retrofit for the state building.

Lingle pointed out that transportation projects are paid for out of special revenue funds, not state general funds. And she pledged that state government in general is "looking for efficiencies, cutting nonessential costs and capitalizing on opportunities," just like private business does.

Lingle also urged reducing Hawai'i's dependence on foreign oil as a long-term way to improve the state's situation. Lessening Hawai'i's dependence on oil makes alternative energy an important growth industry for the state, she said.

"We're taking \$7 billion a year and handing it to foreign governments instead of spending it here," she said of the state's fuel bill. Noting that the state's energy costs were \$5 billion just a year ago, she emphasized, "That's money outside of our pockets, outside of our state, outside of our economy."