

## Invest in better state IT systems

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Hawaii is an information technology disaster just waiting to happen.

A small indication of what that could mean came into sharp focus recently when the statewide computerized system that handles motor vehicle and driver licensing for all four counties broke down. In Honolulu, this meant turning away frustrated people standing in line during the midday rush, and the business day ended before a backup system was put in place.

The hard truth is that it could have been worse — much worse. The IT team from the city Department of Information Technology had at least done some crisis planning for such an occurrence and was able to cobble together a replacement system in relatively short order. The statewide Drivers Licensing and Motor Vehicle Registration System is operated by the city for all the counties under a contract with the state that's been in place since 1968.

It's a good thing, too, because the same precautions have not been made for many databases that help manage state government. There is no backup plan, said Sanjeev "Sonny" Bhagowalia, the state's first chief information officer, who has discovered over the more than 16 months since his appointment just how old and vulnerable many of the state's data systems really are.

That's the bad, really scary news. The good news is that Hawaii is on the cusp of changing all that.

With a mix of state funds and a philanthropic grant, the new state Office of Information Management and Technology has completed an IT and Information Resource Management transformation plan that, if all goes well, could help Hawaii leapfrog from the technological basement into the infotech vanguard.

The challenge is daunting, and the plan lays out a seven-phase upgrade program that extends over a 12-year timetable. This means that the commitment to make this leap must persist beyond even a second term of its primary champion, Gov. Neil Abercrombie, if he gets one.

Not many such projects have such a long shelf life, but there are a few. The Hawaii Clean Energy Initiative, for example, aimed at reducing the state's dependence on fossil fuels, has survived one changing of the guard at the governor's residence. That's because policymakers agree that the status quo leaves Hawaii insecure for its critical supplies and without a defense against price fluctuations.

A similar, broad-based, bipartisan commitment to a 21st-century data system is absolutely essential.

The status quo means continued inefficiency and faltering public services. Some state agencies continue to function with antiquated computer networks and mainframes that date back more than 30 years, Bhagowalia said. Staff turns to online marketplaces to find replacement parts.

Other agencies have gone completely old-school to do their business, and their file-cabinet, paper-based records can't be easily shared, slow down the processes and force duplication of efforts across the state bureaucracy.

Bhagowalia dreams big, and said the state's late adoption of current technology has a silver lining. Hawaii can learn from experiences in other states, he said, and implement the most leading-edge and coordinated data systems that can be accessed online and on mobile devices, making government much more user-friendly and productive.

Compare that with what we have: a creaky conglomeration of data systems — 743 in all, most of them concerned with internal management instead of delivering public services.

And don't forget: There's virtually no digital backup.

This is more than risky; it's plain crazy. Hawaii needs to pursue this comprehensive transformation. Asking citizens to hold their breath and hope for the best is no solution.

New info officer seeks upgrade

State's first chief information officer to oversee government technology

Motor vehicle data processing system back online

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