

Invest in state's computer systems

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The high-tech expert hired by Gov. Neil Abercrombie to upgrade the state's aging computer and technology systems received a national award for extraordinary achievement last month, so Hawaii's "F" in a national rating of how states provide online access illustrates the complexity of the problem. The Legislature's proposed reduction of the upgrade's budget would be a significant blow that should be avoided.

Sanjeev "Sonny" Bhagowalia, the state's chief information officer of management and technology, asked for \$29.7 million in each of the next two fiscal years to proceed with an ambitious improvement of the technology infrastructure and avoid "catastrophic and irretrievable loss of data and information."

In his January State of the State address, Abercrombie asked for "a significant, but much-needed, investment of general funds and general obligation bonds. Any less in the funding commitments will adversely affect our ability to make this long overdue information transformation journey."

In addition to public access, he pointed out that the improvement will "provide better accounting of our taxpayer dollars and allow state government to operate more transparently and efficiently."

However, the state House has approved what it calls "a less aggressive approach" to reflect "a more reasonable timeframe ... while focusing on the most urgently needed initiatives." It also criticizes the administration's use of "federal and market salary rates" that are more than 50 percent above the state's salaries. While we see value in investing heftily at the outset to more quickly reach improved efficiency, accountability and savings, it does fall to Bhagowalia and team to justify items such as exorbitant salaries, or be forced to ratchet back.

A veteran of federal information technology, Bhagowalia has devoted nearly two years to upgrading the state government's antiquated and clunky computer systems toward expediency, transparency and public access. His Office of Information Management and Technology (OIMT) has detailed a 12-year road map — the Business and Information Technology/Information Resource Management Transformation Plan — to innovate and apply technology to all sectors. The budget requested invests in accomplishing that task — so the Senate's budget version, which has gone along with the administration's request, should prevail.

A recent report card by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund gave Hawaii the "F" grade on the narrow basis of state websites providing information about the states' purchase of goods and services. Keone Kali, Bhagowalia's chief information officer in charge of operations, pointed out that the report card "doesn't make up the whole picture of what's going on in the state."

In that narrow area, said Phineas Baxandall, the fund's senior analyst for tax and budget policy, "Hawaii's failing score does not mean spending has become less transparent. It means most states are improving faster."

The Federal Computer Week magazine recently included Bhagowalia as the only state official among its yearly 100 awards for completing two plans and 10 projects a year ahead of schedule. That included the first comprehensive analysis of the state's \$11 billion government business environment. He received the same award in 2010 as chief information officer of the U.S. Interior Department.

If Hawaii is to get serious about modernizing its antiquated mishmash of computers — one system is more than 36 years old with parts sometimes findable only on eBay — the Legislature needs to provide the crucial financial support to go forward. Only then will the goal of OIMT's envisioned 21st-century "digital government, mobile government" come within reach.