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Hilo, Hawai'i 96720-4833

November 13, 2025

Steven Pavao, Chair  
Hawai'i County Salary Commission  
101 Pauahi Street, Suite 2  
Hilo, Hawai'i 96720

## Testimony to the Hawai'i County Salary Commission

Subject: Proposed Salary Increases for Elected and Appointed  
Officials-**OPPOSED**

Good Morning Chair, Commissioners, Counsel and Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today. I have the deepest respect for the important role that you serve and it is my sincere desire to contribute constructively toward the decisions that affect our County's future.

Agenda Item No. 6: - ***Unfinished Business (for discussion and appropriate action)*** Review Of Existing: "Pay Plan For Executives And Elected Officials" To Include Discussion And Consideration Of Ideas For Adjustments To Future Salaries Of Executives and Officials (*I have a few ideas listed*).

Agenda Item No. 6(A) **Communication No. 25-04, from Salary Commission Chair Steven Pavao, dated September 4, 2025, regarding their inquiry to the appointing authorities concerning proposed salary adjustments for department heads and deputies. The Salary Commission is proposing to mirror the Hawai'i Government Employee's Association (HGEA) salary increases for the next four years: 3.5% increase, effective January 1, 2026; 3.79% increase, effective July 1, 2026; 4% increase, effective July 1, 2027, and 4% increase on July 1, 2028 (see Exhibit A). Two raises in 2026 for 7.29%?**

As I reviewed the different rationales supporting this proposal for the salary increases, I noticed that the foundation remains the same as in previous years:

SALARY COMMISSION  
COUNTY OF HAWAII

Comm. No. 25-05.06  
Date P/November 17, 2025

leadership salaries continue to be **indexed to union-negotiated raises**. Union negotiations for collective bargaining units are designed for frontline employee *retention* among other things, not for determining the compensation of top executive leadership. These are two very different systems with different goals.

Tying leadership pay to union raises may be expedient, but it is **not a meaningful compensation philosophy**. It does not reflect job responsibility, performance, accountability, or the fiscal health of our County. It is automatic, formulaic, and detached from measurable outcomes. In short, this approach is not an accurate way of valuing public leadership.

Leadership compensation should be based on the **needs and conditions of the County**, not on collective bargaining agreements negotiated at the state level for purposes that do not reflect executive leadership roles. This will allow the Commission to adopt a compensation model rooted in fairness, transparency, and the realities of County operations.

Agenda Item 6(B) **Communication No. 25-05.01: Proposed Findings Of Fact by the 2025 County of Hawai'i Salary Commission, Dated August 28, 2025, #5...March 3, 2025 Classification and Compensation Study conducted by MGT for the County of Maui, historical salary data, salaries of excluded managers within the County of Hawai'i, the schedule of raises for both included and excluded subordinates over the past five years, challenges with recruitment for positions within the County of Hawai'i, the duties and responsibilities of the Covered Positions with the County of Hawai'i, salaries of the Covered Positions' counterparts in other county jurisdictions within the State, inversion challenges, and other public and private industry data. Any significant information for the County of Hawai'i with regard to "schedule of raises..., challenges with recruitment for positions within County of Hawai'i, the duties and responsibilities of the Covered Positions as well as the salaries for those Covered Positions' counterparts..., inversion challenges and other public and private industry data?**

What were the findings from this study for our County? Did it produce cost of living, recruitment and retention data, scope of job responsibilities, fiscal conditions, public expectations, ***inversion challenges, public and private industry data***, and operational size and complexities for our County? If it did,

that would ensure that any future adjustments for our County would be supported by data, not assumptions – and would strengthen public trust.

I understand that these increases are being presented as necessary for **“recruitment and retention,”** but I ask that you carefully consider how this rationale applies within our County’s leadership structure.

Of the 41 positions affected and listed, 11 are elected and 30 are appointed.

For the 11 elected officials, the concept of **“retention”** does not apply, since their continued service depends on voter confidence and performance during their terms, **not** on the salary level. A pay raise does not ensure **retention** in these cases; **only accountability and trust can do that.**

For the 30 appointed positions, this is a real opportunity to strengthen both **“recruitment and retention”** strategy through meaningful measures of performance. Salary adjustments tied to measurable outcomes and accountability benchmarks are just a few factors that would ensure that compensation reflects leadership effectiveness, and not based on **tenure or title.** Results to include:

- filling vacancies
- meeting hiring targets
- reducing chronic staffing shortages
- turnover data
- job complexity
  
- department size
- comparable jurisdictions
- cost of living
  
- scope of legal risk
- improving compliance with EPA (AOC’s)
- reducing spills and emergency failures
- strengthen public services at transfer stations, landfills, and wastewater facilities
- advancing capital projects and timelines
- improving workplace culture and reducing employee burnout

Raises should be **earned**, not inherited. This aligns County leadership compensation with modern accountability practices used across government, nonprofits, and the private sector.

Another rationale for these raises is in comparison to private and public sector wages. Were these comparisons of County of Hawai'i businesses both private and public made known to justify this reasoning? Aside from *some* professionals in the medical, educational and banking fields, **33** of the **42** County of Hawai'i's top officials make 6 digit figures with the other nine very close to that. Also worth noting, Hawai'i County's top officials make more than Maui County's with the exception of their Mayor, County Clerk and Deputy County Clerk. *\*Executive Salary Jurisdiction Comparisons (3/27/2025) submitted.*

**Of Hawai'i's four counties, Hawai'i County is considered the poorest. When referencing living wages, in Hawai'i County many residents are not making a living wage and many are below the FPL (Federal Poverty Level), although working.**

Notable too is of the 68 Job Listings for the County that was recently posted, 18 can be considered below a living wage.

I still believe that there are so many people on our island, in our "town" that would appreciate a job with the county. The benefits and stability far outweigh the wages in most of these entry level positions, and across every department.

We need to support the HR Department. **(6) Communication No. 25-06** Interesting to note, three departments have more employees than position count. I think that to better realize the true picture of how many of the employees are in "working" status (***understaffing due to absences and not just vacancies not filled***), it would be good to know the number of employees that are on ***Workers Comp, FMLA, Extended Sick Leave, Military Leave and Administrative Leave***. That information will help to better understand how dire this whole situation is and more so reason to give pause to the proposed significant raises our County cannot sustain.

For years our County's departments have been plagued with ***understaffing, overworked employees, delayed projects, and modified services directly***

**contributing to increased workloads leading to burnout (stress-health concerns), error (safety issues), and a decline in service quality and morale.** I would be remiss if I didn't mention or ask when and how newly positions are created within departments that are already suffering vacancies.

The Department of Environmental Management **is under multiple EPA Administrative Orders on Consent (AOC's) for violations** with expected costs of federal compliance to be around \$1 billion-AMP testimony, August 13, 2025.

I believe any salary decisions should be based on results of fiscal responsibility and accountability accompanied by transparency in leadership **for every Department.** This simply means that there should be no raise/adjustments to department heads whose departments are not fulfilling its core function. **Total salaries at the start of 2025 is over \$6,338,592 and at the end of the proposed four year period, 2028; over \$7,365,840 with raises totalling in excess of \$1M.** Updates and repairs to our failing wastewater facilities and would be better served with this money (outgoing Commissioner EMC, District 3).

Agenda Item 6.A **Communication No. 25-04 Salary Commission's Questionnaire to Department Heads**.. \* 1. "Primary duties and responsibilities of the department/agency." 2. "How many employees does the department/agency employ?" 3. "What is the department/agency organizational structure?" 4. "What does the department/agency operating budget and funding encompass?" 5. "What major challenges do the department/agency face?" 6. "Are there any overtime requirements of the department/agency?" 7. "What are your recommended salary adjustments and the rationale for these adjustments?" **\*Maybe being more specific with the department heads' to list and identify ongoing hurdles and setbacks with staffing issues noting how and what they're doing to resolve it timely, and if they actually are.**

I'd also like to note that, at this time, only five of the nine Salary Commission seats are filled (website). I recognize that quorum may still be met, but decisions of this magnitude — particularly involving the proposal of these substantial raises for the top County leadership, — deserve the full participation of all nine commissioners, from all nine districts.

Because ***“recruitment and retention”*** is central to this discussion, equal effort should be made to ensure that this Salary Commission (and every other commission) be fully represented and that their work reflects the balance and inclusiveness our County deserves; and as the County Charter intended.

While I also understand the need to attract and retain qualified personnel, it's equally important that compensation must reflect more than position alone. It should reflect commitment, results and accountability.

***At a time when so many county employees are asked to do more with less, I feel that the employees and the public need to see to appreciate that raises to the top is the last action to be taken at this time.***

In closing, my request is simply that the Commission consider aligning all proposed salary increases and any ***future raises*** with ***performance standards that demonstrate efficiency, leadership, service to the public, and fairness to the employees that they manage.*** *Doing so would reaffirm the County's commitment to transparency, fairness, and responsible stewardship-ensuring that every dollar spent honors the trust placed in our leaders by the people they serve.*

I seriously ask the Commission to consider a temporary pause to these very significant raises until ***essential services stabilize.*** ***It is not responsible to authorize these exorbitant increases for top leadership when critical County operations are understaffed, when public services are declining, and when we cannot fill all of the vacancies. A short time pause demonstrates integrity, restraint, and respect for the public's lived reality.***

Before I end my testimony, I do need to say that everything mentioned and said is not meant to diminish or devalue our County leadership. Rather, it seeks to elevate the standard for how we justify compensation at the highest levels of government. It aligns with principles of fairness, transparency and accountability – and it reflects the values of our community.

I offer this testimony with the hope that we can move toward a compensation framework grounded in *pono*, supported by data, and reflective of the County's actual needs and priorities.

Thank you for your time, dedication, civic engagement and thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dell Otsuka". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "O".

Dell Otsuka

District 3, Keaukaha

**Executive Salary Jurisdiction Comparisons**

**Exhibit B**

POSITIONS	STATE <sup>1</sup>	C&C HONOLULU	HAWAII	MAUI	KAUA <sup>12</sup>
EFFECTIVE DATES: (EXCEPT AS NOTED)	7/1/2025 <sup>AAA</sup>	7/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24
GOVERNOR	\$217,908				
LT. GOVERNOR	\$216,660				
ADMIN DIRECTOR of the STATE	\$216,660				
MAYOR		\$217,392	\$209,028	\$159,578	\$164,472
M.D./ ADMIN. ASS'T./ DIR.		\$207,912	\$197,496	\$172,154	\$158,640
DEPUTY M.D.		\$197,136	\$170,676	\$154,939	
PROS ATTY		\$206,040	\$197,004	\$173,073	\$158,640
1ST DEPUTY PA		\$195,888	\$187,668	\$164,418	\$142,776
DEPUTIES: PA, Corp Counsel		\$78,120 - \$195,720 (PA) \$78,120 - \$195,720 (CC)	\$98,508 - \$169,920 (PA) <sup>8</sup> \$112,572 - \$166,980 (CC)	\$92,776 - \$158,288 (PA) \$104,929 - \$162,359 (CC)	\$136,512 (PA, CC)
DEPT. HEADS.					
DAGS, DBEDT, DCCA, DCR, DHHL, DHRD, DHS, DLE, DLIR, DLNR, DOA, DOH, DOT, TAX BUDGET & FINANCE	\$206,352				
ATTORNEY GENERAL/CORP COUNSEL	\$216,660	\$194,208	\$170,652	\$159,466	\$148,728
HUMAN RESOURCES	\$216,660	\$199,776	\$197,004	\$173,073	\$158,640
INFO TECH		\$194,208	\$165,384	\$155,080	\$142,776
POLICE		\$194,208	\$162,540		
FIRE		\$239,976	\$197,052	\$183,889	\$158,640
MEDICAL EXAMINER		\$232,368	\$194,400 <sup>1</sup>	\$183,889	\$158,640 <sup>4</sup>
EMERGENCY SERVICES		\$400,008			
PLANNING		\$194,208	\$170,676	\$158,996	\$148,728
PUBLIC WORKS			\$170,460	\$169,333	\$158,640 <sup>5</sup>
DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION		\$194,208			
FACILITIES MAINTENANCE		\$194,208			
ENVIRONMENTAL SVCS/MGT		\$194,208	\$170,676	\$169,333	
LIQUOR			\$162,540	\$161,063	\$136,508
WATER		\$199,517.76 <sup>6</sup> (7/1/20)	\$175,980 <sup>6</sup>	\$165,263	\$158,640
CUSTOMER SERVICES		\$194,208			
ENTERPRISE SERVICES		\$194,208			
HOUSING			\$162,540	\$155,392	\$142,776
COMMUNITY SERVICES		\$194,208			
HUMAN CONCERNS				\$155,392	
LAND MANAGEMENT		\$194,208			
PARKS		\$194,208	\$165,540	\$156,332	\$148,728
RESEARCH & DEV/ECONOMIC DEV.			\$162,540		\$136,512
ROYAL HAWAIIAN BAND		\$184,272			
TRANSPORTATION		\$194,208		\$146,307	
AGRICULTURE				\$119,700	
EAST MAUI WATER AUTHORITY				\$149,000	
O'IIWI RESOURCES				\$119,700	
DEPUTIES					
DAGS, DBEDT, DCCA, DCR, DHHL, DHRD, DHS, DLE, DLIR, DLNR, DOA, DOH, DOT, TAX BUDGET & FINANCE	189,804				
1ST DEPUTY AG/CORP COUNSEL	199,308	\$184,272	\$162,516	\$143,518	\$142,776
HUMAN RESOURCES	199,308	\$195,888	\$187,668	\$164,418	\$142,776
INFO TECH			\$157,668	\$139,571	
POLICE		\$184,272			
		\$228,864	\$187,668	\$174,694	\$142,776

POSITIONS	STATE <sup>1</sup>	C&C HONOLULU	HAWAII	MAUI	KAUAI <sup>2</sup>
EFFECTIVE DATES: (EXCEPT AS NOTED)	7/1/2025 <sup>AAA</sup>	7/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24
FIRE		\$221,592	\$184,680 <sup>4</sup>	\$174,694	\$142,776 <sup>4</sup>
MEDICAL EXAMINER		\$390,120			
EMERGENCY SERVICES		\$184,272			
PLANNING		\$184,272	\$162,540	\$143,097	\$136,512
PUBLIC WORKS			\$162,348	\$152,401	\$142,776 <sup>5</sup>
DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION		\$184,272			
FACILITIES MAINTENANCE		\$184,272			
ENVIRONMENTAL SVCS/MGT		\$184,272	\$162,540	\$152,401	
LIQUOR				\$144,956	
WATER		\$190,448.76 <sup>6</sup> (7/1/20)	\$167,220 <sup>6</sup>	\$147,511	\$142,776
CUSTOMER SERVICES		\$184,272			
ENTERPRISE SERVICES		\$184,272			
HOUSING				\$139,853	
COMMUNITY SERVICES		\$184,272			
HUMAN CONCERNS				\$139,853	
LAND MANAGEMENT		\$184,272			
PARKS		\$184,272	\$157,668	\$140,700	\$142,776
RESEARCH & DEV/ECONOMIC DEV.			\$146,292		
TRANSPORTATION		\$184,272		\$131,676	
AGRICULTURE				\$107,730	
O'WI RESOURCES				\$107,730	
LEGISLATIVE BRANCH					
	1/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24	7/1/24
SPEAKERS/PRES	\$83,052				
MEMBERS HSE/SEN	\$74,160				
COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON		\$127,368	\$99,024	\$86,336	\$88,512
COUNCIL MEMBERS		\$117,360	\$90,024	\$80,299	\$78,672
COUNTY CLERK		\$194,208	\$162,540	\$173,073	\$148,728
DEPUTY COUNTY CLERK			\$146,292	\$164,418	\$142,776
COUNTY AUDITOR		\$194,208	\$162,540	\$159,370	\$148,728

<sup>1</sup> State departments have statewide responsibility for all islands.

<sup>2</sup> Salaries for the County of Kauai reflects the maximum salary each position may be compensated at. The respective appointing authority may set the salary of any new or existing non-elected appointee at a figure lower than the maximum salary.

<sup>3</sup> Maui's Budget & Finance does not include Budget.

<sup>4</sup> Hawaii's Fire includes Emergency Medical Services and Ocean Safety; Kauai Fire includes Ocean Safety

<sup>5</sup> Kauai's Public Works includes Environmental

<sup>6</sup> Salary set by Water Board

<sup>7</sup> For Maui's Prosecuting Attorney and Corporation Counsel deputies, appointing authority can set the salary 20% higher or lower than the salary range, provided that the salary does not exceed that of the 1st Deputy.

<sup>8</sup> For Hawaii, the minimum range of the Deputy Prosecuting Attorneys cannot be lower than 50% of the Prosecuting Attorney's salary.

<sup>A</sup> City's Liquor Commission is headed by a civil service employee and is administratively assigned to the Department of Budget and Fiscal Services.

<sup>AA</sup> City's HR Deputy is a Civil Service position

<sup>AAA</sup> The recommendation of the Commission shall become effective unless the legislature disapproves the entire recommendation by adoption of a concurrent resolution prior to the adjournment of the legislative session.

Updated 3/27/2025