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Legislature keeping ferry bill in tow

STORY SUMMARY »

Lawmakers are inching closer to coming up with legislation to save the Hawaii Superferry, which is barred by court injunction from sailing.

Senate Democrats yesterday said they have enough votes to go into a special session to pass a law allowing the boat to run. House members have said they already have the votes.

But legislators are mulling over conditions under which the ship operates in environmentally sensitive areas and also are considering an investigation into how the ferry was first granted permission to sail without doing an environmental impact statement.

FULL STORY »

By Richard Borreca and B.J. Reyes

rborreca@starbulletin.com

bjreyes@starbulletin.com

House and Senate leaders now say a special session to permit the Hawaii Superferry to resume service could start by next Wednesday.

Democratic senators met privately yesterday and agreed to go into special session. Previously they had hoped to act by Monday.

Senate President Colleen Hanabusa said the Senate would approve some sort of legislation to permit the \$85 million vessel Alakai to resume service to Kauai and Maui.

But Hanabusa said the specifics of the legislation are still being worked on in closed-door sessions between House and Senate leaders.

The bill is not likely to be ready for comment until Friday at the earliest, Hanabusa said.

The latest version of the measure permits the boat to sail despite a court injunction, but also authorizes an investigation by the legislative auditor into how the Superferry was first permitted to operate without doing an environmental study. The measure would also authorize a citizens' task force to monitor the ferry's compliance with whatever new regulations are prescribed.

Hanabusa said the current draft legislation calls for the state to enact rules to answer environmental critics' concerns.

"We believe we must balance all issues and the Superferry can then decide whether they want it or don't

want it and they can make the final choice," Hanabusa told reporters after the 90-minute caucus.

House Speaker Calvin Say said majority Democrats planned to hold a caucus this afternoon to discuss proposed legislation.

"We're hoping to get something done by Friday at the latest," said Say (D, St. Louis Height-Wilhelmina Rise-Palolo Valley).

He said there had been no talks between House leaders and Superferry officials.

Say also said he would not be in favor of holding public meetings on various neighbor islands to solicit input.

"At this point, because of the time constraints, I'm not looking at going to the neighbor islands," he said.

Hanabusa said the Senate is considering holding its own informational briefings on the neighbor islands, perhaps as soon as Friday.

Leaders also have to deal with concerns of a conflict of interest, because Say's son had been employed by the Superferry. He was one of the 250 employees furloughed last week.

Say said he would ask for a ruling.

"At that point, I'll probably step down from the rostrum and ask the acting speaker" for a ruling on any potential conflict, he said. "At that point he'll rule for or against me."

Hanabusa said, "This is a small island and I don't know how you are going to avoid these potential conflicts."

"I am not certain that simply because his son is or was working for the Superferry somehow disqualifies him," she said.

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