



Big Island Press Club

Since 1967 ... protecting the public's right to know.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Big island press club announces annual lava tube, torch of light awards

Former Mayor Billy Kenoi awarded Lava Tube dishonor; Nancy Cook Lauer earns meritorious Torch of Light award

The Big Island Press Club awards its annual meritorious Torch of Light Award to West Hawaii Today reporter Nancy Cook Lauer and the Lava Tube dishonor award to former Hawaii County Mayor Billy Kenoi. The Torch of Light award is given to an individual who brightens the public's right to know, while the Lava Tube dishonor is given for a lack of communication and keeping the public in the dark.

Lava Tube Dishonor

The Lava Tube is awarded to Kenoi for his failure to disclose a number of personal expenditures relating to his use of a county-issued purchasing card, as well as a failure to disclose as required by law other financial matters such as real estate sales.

Kenoi's admitted misuse of his pCard involved large alcohol and food expenses, including visits to Honolulu hostess bars. A surfboard and other purchases considered personal were also uncovered, including "meals at the Volcano House Restaurant and the Hilo Yacht Club," for which Kenoi was accused of falsifying records. The mayor repaid taxpayers for the purchases, though some payments took years, and not until they were uncovered by journalists.

Kenoi was eventually indicted on theft and record-tampering felony charges, but was acquitted after state prosecutors were unable to convince a jury that he had intentionally planned to "permanently deprive" funds from the taxpayers of Hawaii County. Despite his acquittal, Kenoi admitted at the start that "Certainly, I could have used better judgment ... I've used my pCard when I shouldn't have." He admitted to violating the county ethics code.

Further indiscretion uncovered during the mayor's final year in office included Kenoi's failure to disclose the sale of lands belonging to him, as required by county

law. Between 2012 and 2014, Kenoi and his wife sold over two dozen acres of agricultural-zoned land worth nearly \$400,000 and did not list these transactions on annual forms requiring the mayor to report “real property with a fair-market value of \$5,000 or more sold during the disclosure period.”

Since its founding, the Big Island Press Club has protested any absence of transparency or accountability within the halls of state and county government in Hawaii. The BIPC’s officers believe that Kenoi’s lack of transparency regarding his personal assets and taxpayer-funded expenditures was a disservice to the citizens he was elected to represent. Big Island residents should be able to trust their chief executive to be forthcoming in his or her dealings as a public official and, with these acts, Kenoi failed to honor that trust.

Torch of Light

BIPC has selected Nancy Cook Lauer, a reporter for West Hawaii Today, for its Torch of Light award. Cook Lauer is honored for her work on breaking the story surrounding Kenoi’s use of a county-issued pCard.

As a column in Honolulu Civil Beat explains, “Lauer is the dogged reporter who uncovered Kenoi’s questionable use of a county credit card, including charging taxpayers for the \$900 he spent in one day at a Honolulu ‘hostess’ bar.”

When covering the mayor, Cook Lauer had requested access to a number of financial disclosure reports concerning Mayor Kenoi’s travel expenses, only to be sidelined by the county. Cook Lauer was able to report on Kenoi’s alleged misdeeds with the help of an anonymous source, who provided Cook Lauer with the necessary documents implicating Kenoi in the ensuing scandal.

The allegations against Kenoi were serious enough for Cook Lauer and other journalists to further investigate the mayor’s pCard use. The ensuing due process of law would not have been possible without Cook Lauer’s initial reporting on the mayor.

The BIPC has always maintained that it is the role of the media to bear witness and be the eyes and ears of the public. Independent reporting is critical to providing the public necessary information so that they may infer informed conclusions about their government, especially concerning the people elected to represent them.

The Big Island Press Club, the state's oldest press club, founded in 1967-- has awarded the Lava Tube and the Torch of Light annually since 1997 on Freedom of Information Day, March 16. This day also marks the birthday of our nation’s fourth president, James Madison. Born in 1751, Madison was the principal architect of the U.S. Constitution, and one of the three authors of the Federalist Papers; he is recognized by historians as one of America’s earliest and foremost advocates for open, accountable governance.

Previous Lava Tube Dishonorees

2015 State Land Board Chairwoman Suzanne Case

2014 Chief Elections Officer Scott Nago
2013 Democratic Party House District 5 Council
2012 State Sen. Clayton Hee
2011 Governor Neil Abercrombie
2010 Hawaii County Council
2009 Noelani Whittington, County Department of Public Works
2008 Mayor Harry Kim and Hawaii County Council
2007 State Board of Education
2006 Honolulu, Kauai, and Hawaii County Councils
2005 District Judge Matthew S.K. Pyun
2004 State Land Board Chairman Peter Young
2003 State Sen. Cal Kawamoto
2002 University of Hawaii Board of Regents
2001 University of Hawaii Board of Regents
2000 State Rep. Eric Hamakawa and Hawaii County Councilman James Arakaki
1999 Hawaii County Council
1998 Hawaii Gov. Ben Cayetano
1997 Hawaii County Councilman Elroy Osorio

Previous Torch of Light Honorees

2015 State Sen. Lorraine Inouye
2014 USGS HVO Scientists
2013 Mayor Billy Kenoi
2012 County Councilwoman and state Rep. Helene Hale (posthumously)
2011 State Judicial Selection Commission
2010 Hawaii County Civil Defense and other departments
2009 Legislature, Gov. Linda Lingle
2008 Les Kondo, Office of Information Practices
2007 West Hawaii Today
2006 Lillian Koller, State Department of Human Services
2005 Retired Circuit Judge Paul de Silva
2004 UH Manoa Journalism Professor Beverly Kever
2003 U.S. Rep. Patsy Mink (posthumously)
2002 Hawaii County Mayor Harry Kim
2001 Hawaii County Clerk Al Konishi
2000 Hawaii Gov. Ben Cayetano
1999 Jerry Rothstein and Judith Graham
1998 Environment Hawaii and Common Cause
1997 Society of Professional Journalists, Hawaii Chapter

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