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Legislators gathered Thursday evening in Kona at a **Community Enterprises' West Hawai'i Forum** to engage with more than 100 residents on issues that matter to West Hawaii communities. How to pay teachers more money to help them absorb Hawaii's substantial cost of living was discussed at length.

"I think everyone generally agrees that teachers are really underpaid, it's just always a question of where does the extra revenue come from," said Rep. Nicole Lowen, who represents Kailua-Kona, Holualoa, Kalaoa and Honokohau. *"Especially in a year like this where it's been a challenging year for the budget."*

Gov. David Ige is currently involved in the collective bargaining process with the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA). Rep. Cindy Evans, who represents North Kona, South Kohala and North Kohala, explained while legislators aren't part of those negotiations, they will be tasked with figuring out how to pay for whatever terms the governor strikes with the teachers union.

A proposal by the HSTA suggests a surcharge on property taxes to increase teacher pay, but such action would require a constitutional amendment and therefore must be put on the ballot and decided by Hawaii voters.

Sen. Josh Green, who represents Kona and Ka'u, voiced his support for that measure after citing legislation he proposed to start all Hawaii educators at a minimum salary of \$50,000 per year.

According to Hawaii Department of Education information on hawaiipublicschools.org, educators who began their careers in Hawaii during the 2015-16 school year, had completed a state-approved teacher education program, and held only a bachelor's degree started off between \$45,000-\$48,000 per year based on their level of prior teaching experience.

"We've severely under-financed our capacities to pay teachers and that's why they leave," Green said. *"People don't like taxes sometimes, but if you put that bill on the ballot, I say it's OK. Let people ask themselves if that's going to be a top priority."*

Ideas abundant, but no action plan yet

West Hawaii legislators pitch ways to increase teacher pay

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Evans



Green



Lowen

Lowen added she believes there's been a misconception about what the property tax surcharge would mean for the average resident.

“(HSTA’s) proposal, to clarify, applies to second homes or residential investment and hotel and resort properties,” she said. *“If you own just one home and that’s it, it would not affect that.”*

Evans said there are other options to help the state absorb the cost of increasing pay for teachers, but added the problem is complicated and likely requires investment in Hawaii’s innovation and agricultural economies to increase tax revenue.

For Hawaii Island, she said, the best immediate avenue is tourism. Evans brought up legislation that would allow companies like Airbnb, online transient accommodations brokers, to collect and remit taxes from property owners in Hawaii who use the website to list vacation rentals.

Ige vetoed a similar bill last year, citing concern that enlisting Airbnb as a tax collector “provided a shield for owners who do not currently comply with county laws.”

Airbnb has claimed if enabled, it could collect upwards of \$100 million in tax revenue for the state.

“It’s been controversial, but I must say I think we’re going to end up with an Airbnb bill,” Evans said. “The thing is that all of the people that play by the rules, which is all of your hotels and timeshares and people who play by the rules for vacation rentals, they’re getting really sick and tired of the people who aren’t paying their fair share.”

In that same vein, Evans referenced Ige’s push for a tax modernization program to better track and collect unpaid taxes the state is owed.

Evans said while the public is still *“overwhelmingly against”* bringing gambling to the state to create revenue, decriminalization of marijuana may be another avenue to explore in the near future to fill the state’s coffers and pay for initiatives that would increase teachers’ salaries.

“We collectively — four, five or six years from now, maybe even sooner — will talk about legalizing marijuana,” Evans said. *“People don’t want to talk about it now, but if you look across the nation in the states that have it, they’re claiming it’s a great revenue source for them.”*

Green explained that increasing pay for educators should be a top priority, however it can be accomplished, because of the inherent investment value of spending on education initiatives.

“Every \$1 we invest in education, we know we know get \$7-\$10 dollars back, whether it’s through better jobs, economic growth or decreased utilization of any number of services,” Green said.