

Making a statement for Hawaii's fashion industry

Private and public sectors join to give local designers higher visibility

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Hawaii's fashion industry is becoming economically fashionable, attracting investment dollars from both the state and City and County of Honolulu.

They see growth potential for an industry that already is generating more than \$750 million in annual sales, \$20.4 million in tax revenue and 3,630 jobs at an average salary of about \$24,000.

The state is contributing \$157,500 and the City and County of Honolulu is adding another \$10,000 to support the industry in its first-ever Hawaii Fashion Month, slated for October.

Dennis Ling, business development administrator for the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, sees economic benefits from promoting the industry for a month. For example, he said, a 1 percent increase in direct sales would generate about \$200,000 in tax revenue and create 37 new jobs.

State Sen. Will Espero, D-Ewa Beach, co-chair of Hawaii Fashion Month, agrees.

"We're an international retail destination now," he said. "We, however, have much local talent that can use a boost and assistance, and that's one of the big reasons we're doing this — to promote Hawaii's local talent."

The month-long event will showcase various facets of the fashion industry, including design, manufacturing, retail, education, art, photography and styling.

"This is an area where we can help [diversify] our economy through fashion, and using individuals' creative talent," Espero said.

The \$167,500 in government funding includes a \$100,000 grant in aid to the Hawaii Fashion Incubator, \$57,500 from DBEDT's creative industries and strategic industries divisions, and a \$10,000 grant from the City and County of Honolulu Office of Economic Development.

"The state sees that the fashion industry is a creative industry that can basically create jobs along the entire production cycle," said Melissa White, co-founder of the Hawaii Fashion Incubator and co-chair of Hawaii Fashion Month. "And, it can be exported. It's a great industry base for the state."

At least \$40,000 of the funding will be devoted to a trade show for emerging designers that will feature panel discussions, speakers, industry networking and wholesale and retail opportunities. Espero said it likely will be held in vacant space below T.J. Maxx at Ward Village Shops.

Another \$10,000 will go toward the Governor's Fashion Awards, recognizing fashion design talent throughout the state. The rest of the money will help cover operations.

Georja Skinner, administrator for DBEDT's creative industries division, said Hawaii Fashion Month will help to elevate the idea of fashion design in Hawaii.

"We're interested, from the creative industries side, in seeing a successful, ongoing effort to develop more opportunities for export of design and other products that are in the creative clusters," she said.

Skinner sees potential for the industry to grow in both the number of jobs and tax dollars generated for the state.

"The potential is tremendous, providing we are doing a good job of making those connections and showcasing the excellent work of our designers who are right here at home throughout the state," she said.

Designers involved with Hawaii Fashion Month range from up-and-coming designers to well-known designers and companies such as Sig Zane and Fighting Eel.

Jams World, which has been manufacturing clothing in Hawaii since 1964, also will participate.

"Besides the added national and international exposure, it would also hopefully help to create more of a synergy with all the local designers and manufacturers here in Hawaii, including the groups starting out, and hopefully become a bit of a draw to Hawaii for this month," said Jams World CEO Mark Tsuda. "If we're able to ... showcase our talented designers here and our long-time companies like ourselves, and Tori Richard and Reyn Spooner, that's great."

Espero said that in addition to supporting high-quality fashion-related brands, he wants Hawaii Fashion Month to become an annual international event, attracting visitors to Hawaii.

"You can see the obvious connection with tourists and tourism, because they do come here and buy clothes," he said.

While Hawaii Fashion Month board members are working on securing airline and hotel sponsors, Tsuda said they could not have pulled off the month-long event without support from the state.

"We just wouldn't have the funds," he said.