



**DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS,
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TOURISM**
KA 'OIHANA HO'OMOHALA PĀ'OIHANA, 'IMI WAIWAI
A HO'OMĀKA'IKĀ'I

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**MINUTES OF THE HAWAII'S SISTER-STATE AND INTERNATIONAL
PARTNERSHIPS COMMISSION MEETING**

Held on Monday, April 13, 2026, at 11:00 a.m.

Commission Members Present were:

Wesley Fong	-	Governor Appointee
Karen Knudsen	-	Governor Appointee – East-West Center
Brian Taniguchi	-	Senate President Appointee

Guests:

Milton Kwock	-	Yamagata Kenjin Kai
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Staff:

Nicholas Kido	-	Office of the Attorney General
Dennis Ling	-	DBEDT
Marlene Hiraoka	-	DBEDT
Jamie Lum	-	DBEDT
Timothy Tiu	-	DBEDT

Apologies:

Rep. Greggor Ilagan	-	Chair, House Committee on Economic Development and Technology (Ex-officio)
Sen. Chris Lee	-	Chair, Senate Committee on Water, Land, Culture and the Arts (Ex-officio)
Sherry Menor	-	Speaker of the House Appointee

I. Call to Order

Dennis Ling presided over the meeting which was called to order at 11:03 a.m.

Mr. Ling conducted roll call of the Commission members: Mr. Fong and Mr. Taniguchi were present. Ms. Knudsen was present via Teams.

Rep. Ilagan, Sen. Lee, and Ms. Menor were excused.

Mr. Ling introduced Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Kido, the DBEDT staff, and guest Milton Kwock, Secretary-Treasurer of the Yamagata Kenjin Kai.

Mr. Ling announced that since quorum was not achieved, and several members are awaiting confirmation, today's meeting would be limited to presentations and clarifying

questions only. No deliberations or formal actions (voting) would be conducted.

II. New Business

A. Review of the responsibilities of the Commission

Mr. Ling outlined the Commission's role to:

- Advise the Legislature, Governor, and DBEDT on sister-state relationships, specifically whether to enter or pursue new relationships, or to evaluate existing relationships.
- Make recommendations for international relations activities and establish criteria/standards for engagement.
- Facilitate exchanges and collaboration to support the Department's international work.

B. Overview of Sunshine Law for board and commission members

Deputy AG Kido gave a high-level overview of the Sunshine Law covering these key points:

- Commission business must be conducted openly at properly noticed public meetings so that the public can observe and testify.
- A quorum is required to discuss Commission business; without quorum, members should avoid sharing views or deliberating agenda items. Presentations and clarifying questions are permitted.
- Commission members should avoid serial communications and email discussions on agenda items outside of noticed meetings.
- Limited executive sessions may be used (e.g., consulting with counsel), typically noticed in advance and reflected on the agenda.
- The Office of Information Practices (OIP) has resources on its website covering the Sunshine Law.

Ms. Knudsen asked for clarification about Commission members attending a public event where there is a possibility that a quorum of the members could be present.

Mr. Kido acknowledged that such incidents could occur and are not prohibited.

Members just need to remember to avoid discussing any Commission business outside of properly noticed meetings.

Mr. Fong asked if commission members are required to take the ethics training and file an annual financial disclosure. Mr. Kido replied yes to both but will double check on the financial disclosure issue.

C. Election of a Chair and Vice Chair

Due to lack of quorum, this agenda item was deferred and will be placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

D. Discussion and Recommendation on Sister-State Application from Okayama

Prefecture, Japan.

The Governor of Okayama Prefecture has expressed strong interest in establishing a Sister State relationship with Hawai'i, and a formal application has been submitted with support from the Hawai'i Okayama Kenjin Kai. Okayama already maintains sister city ties with Kaua'i and participates in active educational exchanges, including programs involving Kaimukī High School. A signing ceremony is tentatively planned for May 21, 2026, during the Hawai'i–Japan Sister State & City Summit at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, pending the Commission's recommendation and state approval. Commission members will be invited to attend, and registration costs will be covered by the state. Governor Green and several legislators, including Senator Troy Hashimoto, have signaled their support for this Sister State relationship.

Mr. Fong asked what is a kenjin kai. Mr. Taniguchi replied that it is a club comprised of people whose ancestors are from the same prefecture.

Ms. Knudsen asked if DBEDT has received any testimony opposing Okayama's sister-state application. Mr. Ling replied that DBEDT has only received testimony in support of the application.

No action was taken on this agenda item due to lack of quorum. It will be placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

E. Discussion and Recommendation on Sister-State Application from Yamagata Prefecture, Japan.

Milton Kwock, Secretary-Treasurer of the Yamagata Kenjin Kai, addressed the Commission. Mr. Kwock confirmed that a sister-state application was submitted and that there is broad support for it, including support from Senate President Ron Kouchi, with no negative testimony submitted at recent legislative hearings. He further reported on economic and cultural highlights from Yamagata Prefecture, including premium rice, sake, beef, cherries, and the regional dish *imoni*, along with identified opportunities to enhance trade promotion and market presence in Hawai'i. The Commission was also briefed on ongoing education exchanges, including the friendship city and school partnership between Stevenson Middle School (Honolulu) and Shonai Town (Yamagata), and continued student exchanges between Tokai University's Yamagata campus and Tokai University – West O'ahu. It was noted that Kaua'i stakeholders have expressed interest in collaborating with Yamagata rice producers to support revitalization of local rice cultivation efforts.

Mr. Fong asked if there was any other industry besides rice that would benefit Hawaii economically, diplomatically, culturally or educationally. Mr. Ling emphasized that the efforts to attract Japanese students to Hawaii can lead to benefits in the future and

these students become businesspeople and potential investors and visitors to Hawaii.

There being no further questions, Mr. Ling informed members that the Governor of Yamagata is expected to visit Hawai'i in late July, with an event planned for July 30 at the Prince Waikīkī. Mr. Ling said Commissioners will be invited to this event.

No action was taken on this agenda item due to lack of quorum. It will be placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

III. Announcements

A. Hawai'i Philippines Business Symposium, May 19, 2026

Mr. Ling announced that the Hawai'i–Philippines Business Symposium will be held on Tuesday, May 19, 2026, from 2:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., at the Alohilani Hotel. There will be a marketplace, symposium, and banquet. Governor Gloria Araneta Marcos will attend to reaffirm the sister-state relationship between Hawai'i and Ilocos Norte. Commission members will be invited

B. Hawai'i-Japan Sister-State Summit, May 20-22, 2026

Mr. Ling also announced that the Hawai'i–Japan Sister-State Summit will be held May 20–22, 2026, at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. Commissioners will be invited.

Mr. Ling asked Mr. Kido to confirm that there is no conflict for Commission members to attend these events if the State is covering the costs. Mr. Kido responded affirmatively.

IV. Next Meeting

The Commission discussed the target timing for the next meeting, noting the need to convene before May 20, 2026, to conduct officer elections and formally consider pending applications. Staff will poll member availability and monitor confirmation statuses to ensure a quorum can be met.

Mr. Kido also reviewed quorum and voting requirements, explaining that the Commission is established as a seven-member body and that a quorum of four is the conservative interpretation. He will provide further clarification regarding concurring vote requirements, including whether four concurring votes are needed or if a majority of voting members is sufficient, and will share this information with members once confirmed.

V. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:01 p.m.