

Article highlights DHHL funding needs

By William J. Aila, Jr.

Honolulu Star-Advertiser reporter Rob Perez's wide-ranging article on the Hawaiian Homes Commission and the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands (DHHL) was critical, yet spoke to some of our realities ("Promised Land," Star-Advertiser, Oct. 25).

The story highlights a few of the challenges that have hindered the program since its inception and points to decisions made by previous commissions that were necessary at the time, but have struggled to meet the needs of all beneficiaries — like the issuance of land and leases without a direct funding source for infrastructure construction.

As we navigate through these hurdles, we are provided the 'ike to understand the long-term implications of actions made by the commission today.

While the piece covers new DHHL initiatives meant to serve lower-income families, I am compelled to point out that not all of our beneficiaries are of limited means. For every turnkey offering there are more qualified applicants than there are available homes, with hundreds ready to accept an offer. With that said, the department has heard the call for more affordable housing.

DHHL's vacant lot program allows us to address lower-income families by providing them the opportunity to build a home suitable to their needs. With the department incurring the cost of roads, water, sewage, electricity and lot grading, lessees are only responsible for a vertical structure that is built to county code. Within this program, DHHL also deploys federal funds and local partnerships, including with Habitat for Humanity, to address a range of beneficiary needs.

To go further, the department recently amended the Hawaii Administrative Rules to allow for multifamily units and affordable rentals on Hawaiian Home Lands. These options are the direct result of community feedback and calls for more affordable and diversified offerings.

It is important to highlight that as DHHL traverses through these new and creative paths, we are only able to increase the amount of new homes and affordable housing choices if we receive adequate funding for infrastructure development.

The harsh reality is that the department needs more inventory of home-

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stead lots to award.

The bottom line is that in order to develop more homestead lots and implement a successful homesteading program, infrastructure is absolutely necessary.

We are amidst a financial crisis — that is not lost on me — but I believe the state's economic recovery plan should take into consideration the win-win benefits of a properly funded Department of Hawaiian Home Lands. A sufficient

budget for DHHL will provide stable affordable housing, install necessary shared infrastructure for the development of broader communities, and create thousands of jobs.

Returning the indigenous people of our pae 'aina to their ancestral soil is not only our constitutional duty, it is our moral responsibility.

The serious task of putting Native Hawaiians back onto their land is not one that I or the Hawaiian Homes Commission can tackle alone. It will take the courage of our leaders to properly prioritize DHHL and the collective will of our entire state to support crucial decisions that will chart a pathway to finally fulfilling the vision of Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole.