

# DHHL considers proposal to build casino in Kapolei

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The Department of Hawaiian Home Lands dropped a bombshell on its website late Tuesday, floating the idea of building a casino on trust land in Kapolei.

The nine-member commission that oversees the agency and a 203,000-acre land trust for Native Hawaiians will be asked next week to consider a proposed bill that would authorize the development of a casino in a resort in the growing West Oahu community.

Details were unavailable Tuesday night, but just the idea of a casino in a state where gambling is illegal stunned beneficiaries of

the trust.

"I'm flabbergasted," said Big Island homesteader Ian Lee Loy, who served on the Hawaiian Homes Commission from 2011 to 2013.

The proposed bill became public when the department posted its agenda for its two days of meetings Monday and Tuesday. There was a brief reference to what would be presented to the panel: "Legislative Proposal to Authorize Limited Casino Gaming in the Form of a Single Integrated Resort Property in Kapolei, Island of Oahu, on Hawaiian Home Lands Designated for Commercial Use."

The department would not release details of what

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would be discussed.

In a written statement, Tyler Iokepa Gomes, deputy to Chairman William J. Aila Jr., presented the proposal in economic terms.

“Given the impact of COVID-19 on our state’s economy, the department is proposing a bold measure that has proven successful for indigenous groups in generating critically needed revenue to improve the lives of their people,” Gomes said. “We are at a pivotal moment in the history of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act and resources to develop infrastructure and acquire lands will be needed to fulfill the vision of Prince Kuhio.”

The proposal would have to be approved by a major-

ity of commissioners to be sent to Gov. David Ige, who would then consider whether to include it as part of his package of measures submitted to the Legislature for the upcoming session, which starts in January.

A spokeswoman for Ige declined comment.

Beneficiaries contacted Tuesday night reacted with shock and anger, criticizing the department for proposing something like this without first consulting the beneficiary community.

The trust was established a century ago for the benefit of those at least 50% Hawaiian. Its chief purpose is to return Hawaiians to their native lands through residential, farming and ranching homesteads. But the department has long been under fire for its failure to develop homesteads in a timely fashion, and a lack of resources often is cited.

About 28,000 Hawaiians are on a wait-list seeking homesteads. Some have languished there for decades.

If a casino were built on trust land, it would have a unique status. Unlike Native Americans and Alaskans, Native Hawaiians have no government-to-government relationship with the U.S., so a Hawaii casino would be different from those on tribal lands throughout the mainland.

That would raise questions of oversight, and it’s unclear how a casino on trust land would get around the state law prohibiting gambling.

Robin Danner, chairwoman of the Sovereign Council of Hawaiian Homestead Associations, the largest beneficiary group in the state, blasted the department for floating the idea without first consulting beneficiaries. As owners of the land, beneficiaries must

be the ones to initiate proposals for their land, not a state agency, Danner said.

“It’s not (DHHL’s) place to do this,” she said. “It’s like a thief coming in the night. This is how we’re constantly losing our land.”

Mike Kahikina, who left the commission last year after serving for eight years, likewise criticized the way the department is handling the proposal, saying it reflects a history of beneficiaries being mistreated and

ignored. “One hundred years of just snubbing us continues,” he said.

Details of the proposed bill are expected to be posted on the department’s website as early as today, and the department will take written testimony on the proposal. But the meetings next week, which will be livestreamed, will be conducted remotely because of the pandemic, and no oral testimony will be accepted.