

# Ige pans Hawaiian home lands casino plan

By William Cole  
wcole@staradvertiser.com

The Department of Hawaiian Home Lands recently suggested that Gov. David Ige could include its proposal for "limited casino gaming" in his legislative packet for consideration in the next session, which begins Jan. 20.

It now appears that isn't going to happen.

Ige said Monday on the Honolulu Star-Advertiser's Spotlight Hawaii program, "The benefits (of a casino) would not exceed the social costs of gambling."

He added, "It does not provide economic value to our community."

DHHL said Dec. 21 that if Ige chose not to include the legislation, "the department may seek a legislator to introduce the proposal."

Senate President Ron Kouchi of Kauai noted that former House Speaker Joe

Souki "used to always have interest" in legalized gambling in Hawaii, "so I'm sure there are those who would have an interest" in such a bill.

Sen. Jarrett Keohokalole, whose district includes Kaneohe, Kailua, Heeia and Ahuimanu, "has said he'd introduce the bill to get people off the (DHHL housing) waiting list — a priority of his — and he'd like to at least have the conversation," Kouchi said Monday.

Kouchi also said he's not sure what Sen. Maile Shimabukuro "wants to do as the chair of Hawaiian Affairs in the Senate." He added, "I would at least hear what she has to say — although I am very lukewarm to the idea myself."

Neither Shimabukuro, whose district includes Kalaeloa, Nanakuli and Waianae, nor Keohokalole could be reached for comment Monday evening, but



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Gov. David Ige

Keohokalole previously said he intended to introduce a similar bill if Ige opted out of the DHHL version.

"It's an opportunity to have more voices participate in the discussion," Keohokalole said last week.

The proposal to develop a casino resort on land set aside for Native Hawaiians in Kapolei was approved in a vote at the Hawaiian Homes Commission on Dec. 22. The next step for the plan was to ask Ige to include it in his legislative agenda for 2021.

The Hawaiian Homes Commission voted 5-4 to ask the Legislature to adopt a bill allowing development of a single casino on a commercial parcel that is part of a land trust created a century ago to return Hawaiians to their native lands.

DHHL said its draft legislative proposal could address its nearly \$200 million annual budget shortfall by ensuring the department is the primary beneficiary of the gaming operation through a land lease agreement with the licensee and direct collection of 80% of the proposed state tax on gross gaming revenue.

There are 28,730 Native Hawaiians on DHHL's wait list for a homestead lot. The department believes it would receive at least \$30 million annually from the gaming plan, with the bulk of the money going toward lot development and land acquisitions for home-

stead leases.

Sen. Kurt Fevella, whose district includes Ewa Beach, Ocean Pointe, Ewa by Gentry and Iroquois Point, organized what he called a "peaceful demonstration" in Kapolei on Dec. 22 to oppose the gambling proposal.

"Native Hawaiians are in need of homes, not a casino," Fevella said. "As legislators we need to ensure that the state fulfills its obligation to Native Hawaiians currently on the Hawaiian Homes wait list. I've encouraged all of my legislative colleagues to join me and other DHHL beneficiaries as we peacefully express our opposition to this proposed casino bill."

The controversial proposal survived in a 5-4 vote by the Hawaiian Homes Commission. DHHL, which manages a 203,000-acre homesteading trust, did not confer with beneficiaries, who are at least 50% Hawai-

ian, ahead of time about the plan.

Department officials warned that delaying the measure a year would allow powerful Las Vegas casino industry interests to successfully lobby against and kill the effort.

Kouchi said "there's a concern in general that's still there (that) we may not be able to fully regulate (gaming) and limit it to only what we want — if Native American Indians are then able to do what they want. So that would be one concern."

"Any kind of gaming on your books" allows Native Americans "the ability to operate gaming of any kind," he said.

Kouchi also noted that within the Native Hawaiian community, "there isn't a whole uniform embracing of this" as a funding method to get DHHL beneficiaries off the wait list and onto land.