

Settlement plan advances in Hilo

By Michael Brestovansky

Portions of land at King's Landing in Hilo could be awarded for Hawaiian homesteads by 2026.

A final environmental assessment was published Tuesday for the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands' "King's Landing Kuleana Homestead Settlement Plan," which would take 1,334 acres of DHHL-managed land near Keaukaha and allow beneficiaries to live on those parcels with minimal development.

Currently, the tract of land stretching from south of Nene Street in Keaukaha to Leleiwi and south along the Kapoho Coast Road is unoccupied except for 24 Native Hawaiian residents who live or work on the land in compliance with a DHHL right-of-entry agreement.

But under the plan - which the EA determined would not create a significant environmental impact - the land would be split into four categories of use: 398 acres for homestead lots, 332 acres for community agricultural production, 240 acres for conservation land, and the remainder for community use.

Those homestead lots would be "kuleana homesteads," a form of land use involving minimal development. In order to speed up DHHL's notoriously slow lease award process, kuleana homesteads are largely off-grid, with minimal available infrastructure - although homes will still be required to adhere to building code standards.

According to the final EA, the kuleana model is intended to provide homesteads "for beneficiaries who desire a more rugged, off-grid subsistence lifestyle, who build their own home, utilizing alternative technologies to secure potable water, electricity and manage their own waste."

The 398 acres designated for settlement would be divided into 78 lots, which the EA estimates could support 54 families or 227 individuals.

Lessees would have to be active members of the local Kuleana Homestead Association - in this case, the community association Malama Ka 'Aina Hana Ka 'Aina, or MAHA - and help to maintain a shared right-of-way to access their lots.

Settlement will take place over two phases. The first phase will focus on land along Kapoho Coast Road, which could accommodate up to 38 lots and could award leases by January 2026. The remainder of the lots, located in the more mauka part of the land, likely would be awarded no earlier than April 2027.

The assessment acknowledges the limited infrastructure available in King's Landing might

not be sufficient to sustain an influx of up to 54 families. In particular, Kalanianaʻole Street is the single access route into the area and already struggles to support existing traffic.

"I support the development of more Hawaiian Home Lands being awarded to Hawaiians, but adding more traffic to an already congested Kalanianaʻole Street cannot be supported," wrote architect James McKeague, who submitted feedback during the public comment period for the project's draft EA earlier this year. "Anything less than a second southerly route into the proposed project will be opposed."

A DHHL response to McKeague's comment stated that a traffic study of the area found the project would only increase traffic by an average of 48 vehicles per hour in the morning, and an average of 71 vehicles per hour in the afternoon, which was considered "negligible" compared to existing traffic.

Elsewhere, the EA states that the planned evacuation route for King's Landing would run east-to-west toward Hilo International Airport, then southward toward the Hilo Wastewater Treatment Plant, then west again toward the Hilo Transfer Station and exit at Railroad Avenue.

The assessment does not include any potential costs for preparing the land for settlement or constructing roads.

Outgoing Hilo Councilwoman Sue Lee Loy, who is a DHHL homesteader, said she supports the project for its potential to address the lack of housing for Native Hawaiians.

"People just want to try," Lee Loy said. "The cost of housing has become out of reach for so many Hawaiians, they just want to try something."

But, she added, what limited infrastructure exists in the area will face additional stress from more than just homesteaders.

"I'm having a larger conversation ... about all the assets we have in the area that would be impacted by climate change," Lee Loy said, adding that some sea level rise models indicate that roads like Kalanianaʻole Street might need to be moved in the future to avoid inundation.

The final EA states that the project's lot locations have been designed under a presumed scenario involving a 3.2-foot rise in sea levels, and recommends that future lessees "build structures in areas that do not lie within (the projected future watershed)."

DHHL representatives did not comment in time for this story.

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