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HAWAII NEWS

Sea-level rise risk erodes Hawaiian homestead plan

By [Andrew Gomes](#)
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Business Editors' Picks



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This property at 91-270 Fort Weaver Road, top, shown Tuesday, is the former home of the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, where Hawaiian homestead housing is planned.



Plans for a Native Hawaiian homestead community in Ewa Beach have been scaled back due to issues including sea-level rise and flood risks that have inflated estimated development costs.

The state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands intends to develop 220 single-family and 120 to 160 multifamily homes on less than half of an 80-acre site the federal government conveyed to the agency in 2021.

Over the past couple of years, DHHL had projected being able to develop 600 single-family house lots on the land for \$48 million. The new plan, laid out in a recent draft environmental assessment, is expected to cost close to \$90 million for site work, which doesn't include building any homes.

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The scaled-back and more costly plan for the only land DHHL owns in Ewa Beach is a letdown from earlier expectations that the site could be developed more quickly and for less expense than more isolated DHHL properties because road and utility connections already exist.

"This large swath of flat land is in close proximity to existing infrastructure, which will allow the department to develop these lands quicker and for a lower cost than our more isolated parcels," William Aila Jr., then-DHHL director, said in 2021.

State Sen. Kurt Fevella (R, Ewa Beach-Ocean Pointe-Iroquois Point) expressed disappointment over the new plan, and said in his view DHHL is being too conservative about developing parts of the property but perhaps also received a bad bargain from the federal government.

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"We're getting ripped off again," said Fevella, who supports developing 600 single-family homestead lots on the property. "The state is getting credit (for receiving) 80 acres. I think we can do better for our people."

DHHL Director Kali Watson said the Ewa Beach project still will address urgent housing needs but also must balance the challenges of growth and sustainability for beneficiaries.

"While we're concerned about the sea-level rise situation, there is enough usable land whereby this project significantly addresses the housing shortage for Hawaiian beneficiaries, offering many an opportunity for homeownership and multi-unit rentals adjacent to a beautiful golf course and near schools, beaches and shopping centers," he said in an email.

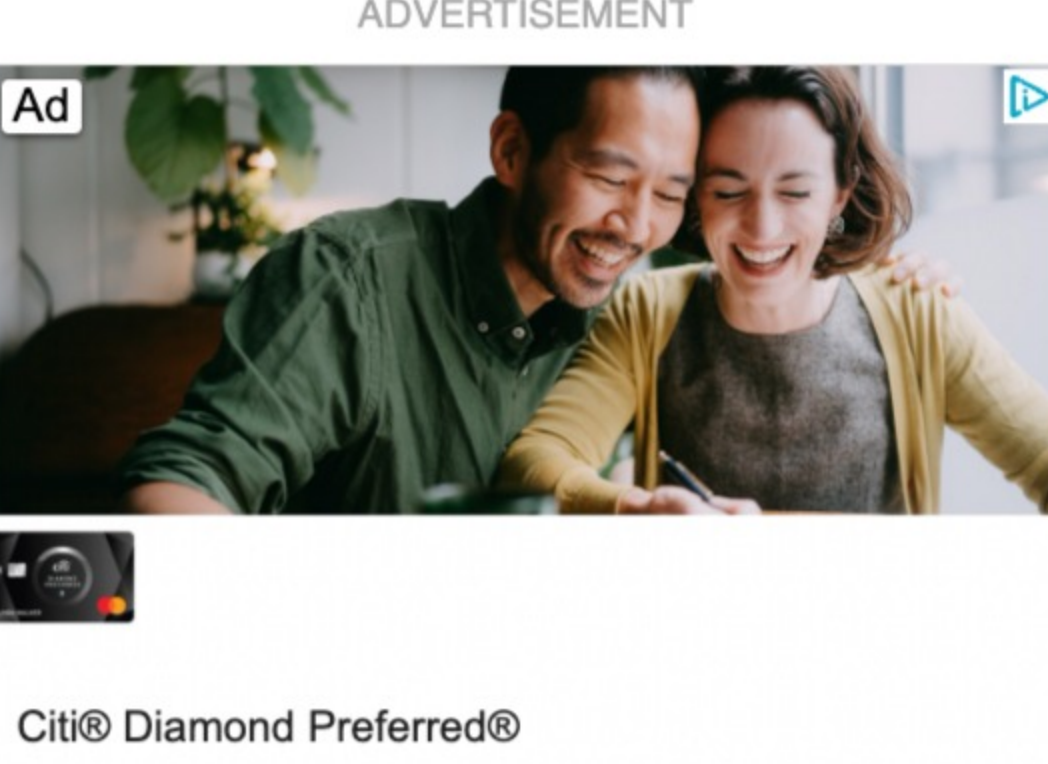
The site was previously home to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Tsunami Warning Center, and borders existing residential subdivisions as well as Ewa Beach Country Club.

Federal officials offered DHHL the parcel pursuant to a 1995 federal law that gives the agency priority to claim excess federal land in Hawaii as a way to make amends for roughly 1,500 acres that the federal government took in prior decades without proper authorization.

Under the Hawaiian Home Lands Recovery Act, DHHL previously had received roughly 900 acres, though the Ewa Beach parcel was the first suited for homestead use and was expected to reduce the monetary value of what the federal government owed DHHL under the 1995 law by about \$10 million from nearly \$17 million.

DHHL has about 28,700 beneficiaries, who must be at least 50% Hawaiian, on a waitlist for homestead leases, mostly on Oahu. Beneficiaries can receive renewable 99-year land leases for \$1 a year and must pay for their own home.

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The agency previously proposed using \$48 million in the fiscal year that began July 1, 2023, to begin development of 600 lots on the Ewa Beach site under a master plan to spend a historic \$600 million appropriated by the Legislature in 2022.

In January, however, Watson, who became the agency's director in early 2023, informed two Senate committees that DHHL was deferring the Ewa Beach project subject to future legislative funding due to constraints largely over sea-level rise projections.

"When we did a study of the site with sea-level rise, we lost a lot of the land, which is susceptible to that," Watson said at the Jan. 9 Senate briefing.

Watson also said at the time that DHHL was exploring whether it could acquire adjacent federal land for homestead development to make more effective use of what it owns. The U.S. Geological Survey controls 95 acres adjacent to the DHHL property for a Magnetic Observatory operation monitoring and studying Earth's geomagnetic field.

Now DHHL has crafted a development plan that in part aims to offset much of the lost development potential of the site by increasing the density of housing with 120 to 160 multifamily units that would be on 8 acres within the projected sea-level rise area but could be accommodated by building up the land.

Multifamily units could include townhouses, low-rise apartments and/or rental units reserved for seniors, according to the agency's plan.

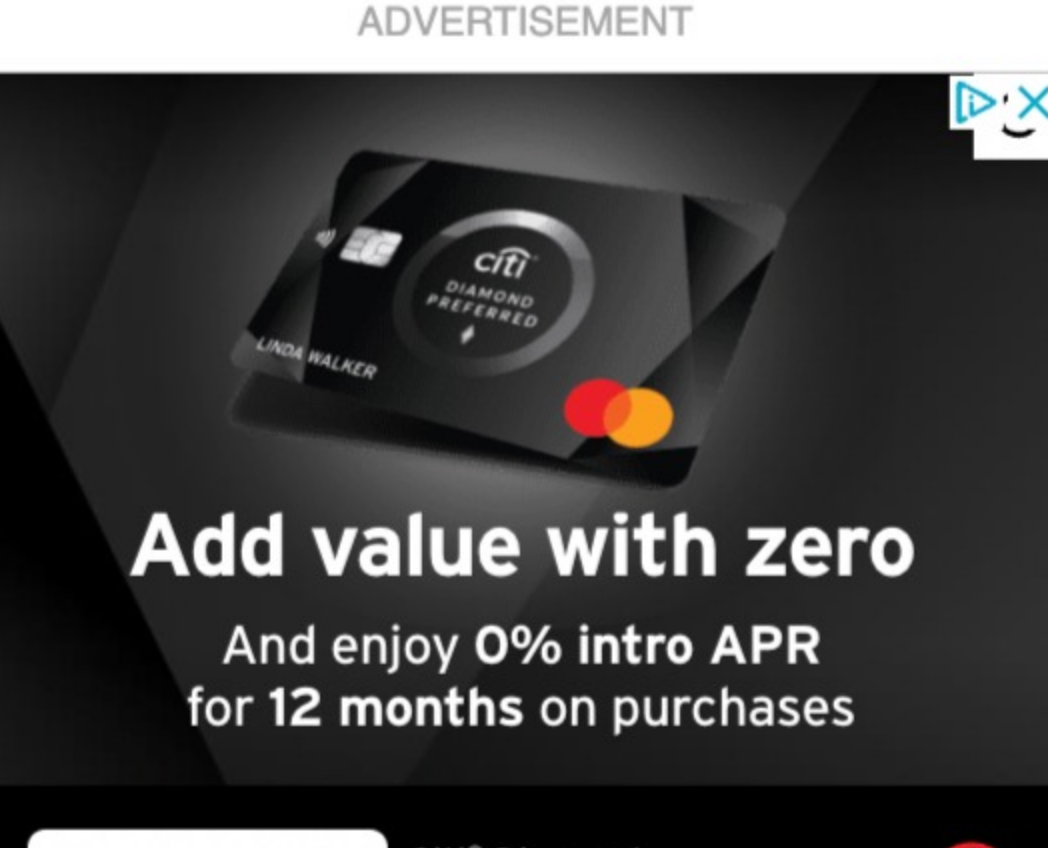
The 200 single-family house lots would be on 25 acres on the mauka side of the property outside the projected sea-level rise zone.

This zone, according to the environmental report, could be affected by passive flooding with a 2-foot rise between 2053 and 2092, high-wave flooding with a 3.2-foot rise between 2068 and 2135, and high-tide flooding with a 6-foot rise between 2098 and 2150.

More than half of DHHL's Ewa Beach property is in the sea-level rise area and borders a stretch of Fort Weaver Road. The road is two blocks mauka of the ocean and separated from the shoreline by four or so rows of existing homes.

Much of this same portion of DHHL's site is also in low-level flood zones. One zone is a "minimal" hazard zone outside a 500-year flood plain, while the other is a "possible" hazard zone where detailed flood risk analyses have not been done by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

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Fevella, who once lived not far from the DHHL site on Pohakupuna Road about the same distance from the shore as the edge of DHHL's property, downplays the project's flood risk assessment, but said the agency could build up its land like other developers have done in response to risk.

Of the 80 acres, 47 acres under DHHL's plan would be designated for things other than residential use, including community agriculture, open space and drainage.

About 15 and the 47 acres would be for "stewardship" as an interim use until opportunities for higher and better uses, including homestead development, possibly become available later on as information and science regarding flooding and sea-level rise projections evolve, the environmental report said.

As for the land DHHL intends for homestead use, the agency has considered, but isn't pursuing, lower- and higher-density alternatives than the one it intends to implement.

On the low side, DHHL estimates that it could develop 220 single-family house lots for \$80 million.

Two higher-density options to the current plan also were considered. One was for 220 single-family house lots and site work for up to 330 multifamily units at an estimated cost of \$92 million. The other was for 220 single-family house lots and site work for 434 to 578 multifamily units at an estimated cost of \$109 million.

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