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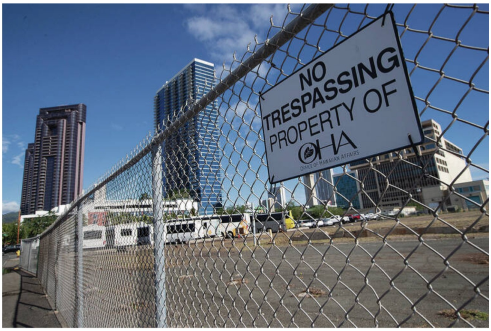
HAWAII NEWS

OHA pitches community on Kakaako Makai housing

By Andrew Gomes

Today • *Last updated 11:50 p.m.*

Editors' Picks



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OHA is proposing a change of use for a parcel of Office of Hawaiian Affairs property, Kakaako Makai, bordered by Ala Moana Boulevard, Forrest Avenue and Ilalo Street.

The state Office of Hawaiian Affairs worked to wrangle public support Wednesday night for its revamped proposal to undo a state law prohibiting residential use of land it owns in Kakaako.

Close to 200 people, including a handful of state lawmakers, turned out for a community meeting the state agency held across the Kewalo Basin harbor channel from much of the highly valued but underused land OHA owns on the Kakaako Makai peninsula.

New OHA board of trustees Chair Kai Kahele, a former state and federal lawmaker, led the nearly three-hour event where attendees were urged to engage in the legislative process to help determine the fate of a draft bill being proposed by the agency to lift the ban on housing in Kakaako, makai of Ala Moana Boulevard.

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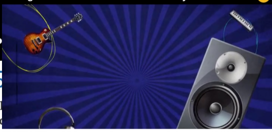

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"We want you to participate. We want you to submit testimony," Kahele said inside the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Ho'okupu Center next to Kewalo Basin Park. "That is the essence of our democracy — civic engagement at its most grassroots level."

Several attendees commended OHA for what they said was an unprecedented effort by the agency to engage directly with area community members, including some longtime advocates of the existing law banning housing in Kakaako Makai.

Kahele, along with OHA CEO Stacy Ferreira and trustee Keoni Souza, chair of OHA's Investment and Land Management Committee, fielded questions and comments after presenting detailed histories of the agency, the man-made peninsula, land-use regulation, affordable housing and OHA's new proposal that is being put forth after more than a decade of unsuccessful efforts to get the law changed at the Legislature.

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This year's legislative session begins Wednesday.

Upholding the ban, which the Legislature imposed in 2006 by passing a law to override zoning by a state agency regulating development in Kakaako, has been rooted in the state House where Scott Saiki represented the area and had long been House speaker or majority leader with power to derail bills aimed at repealing the ban.

Saiki, a Democrat, lost his bid for reelection in August. Still, some House members who attended Wednesday's event said they needed more time and information to take a position on OHA's proposal.

"It was a good starter," Rep. Kim Coco Iwamoto, a Democrat who replaced Saiki representing Kakaako in the House, said after the meeting. "I want to ask more questions."

Rep. Darius Kila (D, Nanakuli-Maili) credited OHA for being prepared and welcoming feedback including criticism. "That's one thing you couldn't say before," he said.

Kila also said after the meeting that he's not ready to take a position on the agency's bid.

OHA's new plan seeks to permit residential use on five of nine parcels the agency owns in the area, along with four blocks owned by Kamehameha Schools.

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Two of these OHA parcels and all four Kamehameha Schools parcels fronting Ala Moana Boulevard are proposed for 400-foot building height limits, up from an existing 200-foot limit.

For those six parcels, OHA proposes mandating that more than 50% of all resulting homes be reserved for Hawaii resident households that don't earn over 140% of Oahu's median income.

Furthermore, buyers of the reserved homes would have to be owner-occupants, and a preference would be given to those who work within 5 miles of the area in "essential" fields that include education, health care, law enforcement, hospitality and construction.

Kahele has framed the proposal, which he said could result in 1,000 to 2,000 new homes,

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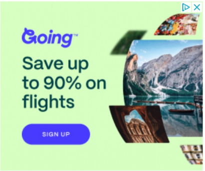
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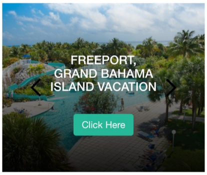

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as helping the state end a chronic shortage of affordable housing for moderate-income households.

During the meeting, Kahele said the agency possibly could partner with Kamehameha Schools or the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands to produce some of the homes, including for some earning less than the median income.

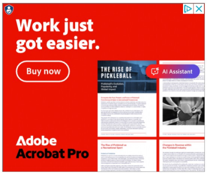
Kali Watson, DHHL director, attended the meeting and welcomed the opportunity to work with OHA and possibly produce homes reserved for DHHL beneficiaries who must be at least half Hawaiian to qualify. “I like your plan,” he told Kahele.

OHA’s mission is to benefit all Hawaiians, and largely does so by funding grants for programs helping Hawaiians. OHA, however, cannot give a preference for housing to Hawaiians.

For the other three OHA parcels, the agency would like to be able to produce market-priced housing within existing height limits and for only Hawaii residents with an owner-occupant restriction.

“We are not building homes for out-of-state investors,” Kahele said.

Kahele said proceeds from market-priced housing would help fund OHA programs and allow the agency to pay for other planned improvements on its Kakaako Makai lands, including a Hawaiian cultural center and public waterfront promenade along the Ewa edge of Kewalo Basin Small Boat Harbor.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Cody Sula, who is Hawaiian but not enough to be a DHHL beneficiary, suggested that the community support OHA’s plan, which he said might not be perfect but is different from typical developers’.

“At the end of the day, if they sit there and do nothing … we going say in 30 years they never do nothing for us,” Sula said during the meeting.

Ron Iwami, founder of the Friends of Kewalos nonprofit, which has opposed residential use in Kakaako Makai for two decades, told Kahele that he can’t support OHA’s new plan. Iwami said he has concerns about contaminated soil being disturbed and possibly leaching into the ocean.

Kahele said such environmental concerns can and would have to be addressed with any development.

Much of the roughly 200-acre peninsula was created from fill as a city dump. Later the buried waste was consolidated and covered to form the hilly Kakaako Waterfront Park. Surrounding commercial development has included warehouses, base yards, ship repair facilities, office buildings, restaurants, a children’s museum and the University of Hawaii medical school.

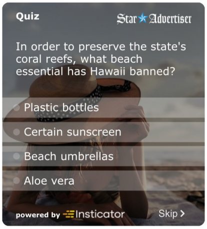
In 2006 the Legislature passed a law to prohibit residential use in the area to block a private project on public land solicited by another state agency, the Hawaii Community Development Authority, which at the time owned much of Kakaako Makai.

That project, by local development firm Alexander &Baldwin Inc., included three condominium towers clustered on one inland lot, a hula amphitheater, restaurants, stores, a farmers market, a public waterfront promenade and a pedestrian bridge spanning the Kewalo Basin harbor channel.

OHA received much of the same land in 2012 — 31 acres valued at about $200 million — to partially settle claims over unpaid revenue generated from former Hawaiian crown lands, referred to as ceded land.

Sen. Jarrett Keohokalole, co-chair of the Legislature’s Native Hawaiian Caucus, said during Wednesday’s meeting that stand-alone commercial development in Kakaako Makai won’t be viable based on the history of failed commercial development around nearby Aloha Tower, so he supports repealing the existing ban.

“This is not Alexander &Baldwin,” said Keohokalole (D, Kaneohe-Kailua). “This is the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.”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- Plastic bottles
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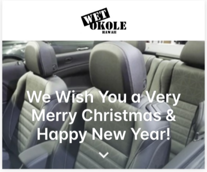

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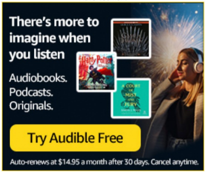

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Kahele, in wrapping up the meeting, said new OHA leadership wants to earn the trust of stakeholders, work out differences and achieve something that is great for the people of Hawaii.

“There’s been a lot of ike (knowledge) that has gone out tonight,” he said, “a lot of passionate conversations … from both sides, and I think that is a fantastic thing.”

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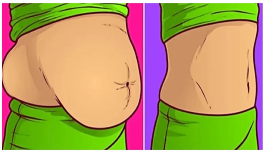

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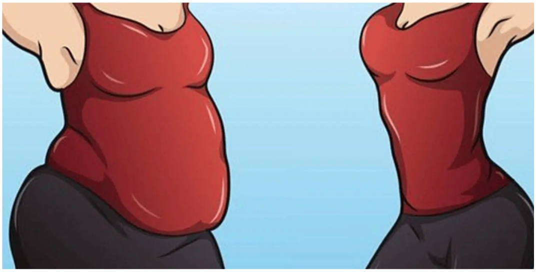

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