

EDITORIAL OUR VIEW

Editorial: Feds must transfer more usable land

Today



There's plenty to unpack in the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands' current proposal for a homestead community in Ewa Beach, on the site of the former Pacific Tsunami Warning Center.

First off: The 80 acres of land was conveyed to DHHL by the federal government, as partial settlement of a historical debt owed to Native Hawaiians for homestead lands taken without payment. In 2021, U.S. Department of the Interior officials "heralded" the land transfer, the Star-Advertiser reported, touting it as "an important step" toward resolving federal obligations.

However: Unlike nearly all federal land previously transferred to DHHL on Oahu, the Ewa Beach property was expected to be much more usable. Former DHHL Director William Aila had projected that up to 600 single-family homesteads could be created on the property.

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In fact: Based on current flood and tsunami risk projections, along with rising sea levels, just one-third of the 80 acres can be used for housing, says current DHHL Director Kali Watson.

Still: Under Watson, DHHL is again proving nimble, proposing to make the most of what's available. The current plan is to create 340 to 380 homesteads: 220 single-family homes on 25 mauka acres of the property; and 120 to 160 multifamily units raised to protect against future inundation or flooding.

DHHL's plan for the Ewa Beach Homestead Project makes the best of a less-than-ideal situation, and continues positive momentum for the agency. However, that should not let the feds off the hook.

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The Hawaiian Homes Recovery Act (HHRA) of 1995 requires the U.S. government to replace land that was designated for homesteads more than a century ago, in 1920, by the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act. Incredibly, however, of 900 acres transferred by the feds, the Ewa Beach parcel is the first that DHHL finds feasible to develop for homesteads.

That's a source of continuing frustration and anger for Hawaiians on DHHL's homelands wait list — a sentiment expressed last week by state Sen. Kurt Fevella, representing Ewa Beach: "We're getting ripped off again."

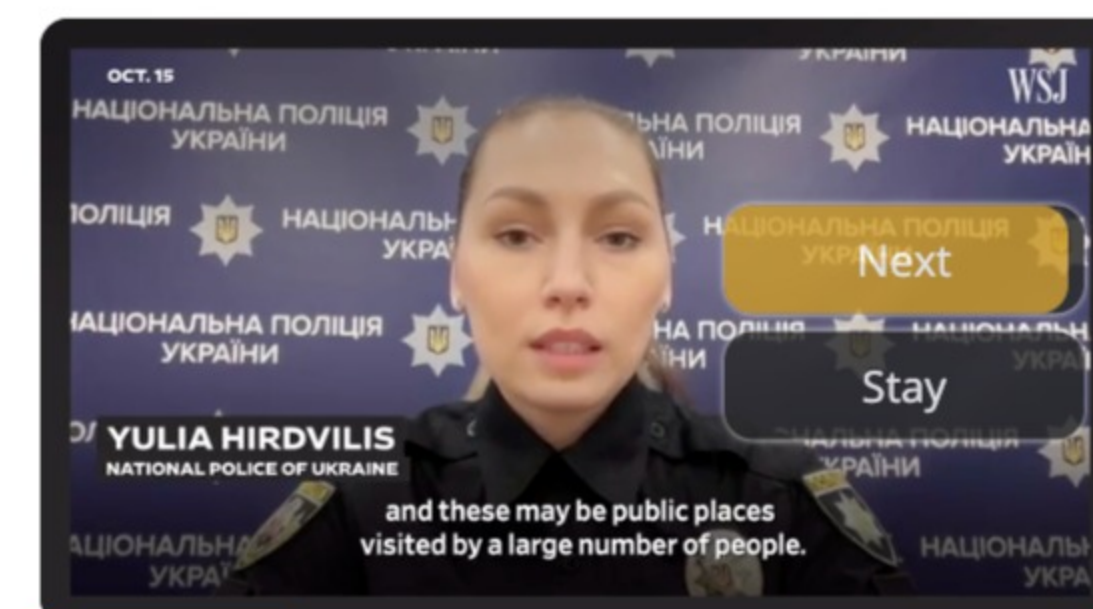
Fevella's right. It's unacceptable that these land transfers are so problematic.

In the spirit of the HHRA, and because the U.S. has performed so poorly in meeting its legal — and moral — obligations, it's high time for federal action to make DHHL whole for lands usurped by the U.S. — land valued at up to \$55 million in 2021 dollars, as the Star-Advertiser reported, and \$64 million today over the 100-plus years this wrong has continued.

Nearly 30 years after the HHRA was signed, it's clear that its mechanism for resolving damage done — transfer of "excess" or unneeded federal land in Hawaii — is essentially "useless," as former Gov. Neil Abercrombie told the Star-Advertiser in 2020. More responsive federal action is needed, and must be pursued by Hawaii's congressional delegation.

The Ewa Beach land transfer had been valued at about \$10 million, reducing current U.S. debt as calculated under the HHRA to about \$7 million. But that calculation is hard to swallow when so few DHHL homesteads have been created due to the subpar land.

Meanwhile, conditions at the property have boosted estimated costs for land development



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