

## OUR VIEW

## HAWAIIAN HOME LANDS

# A compelling plan for Kakaako Makai

**N**early two decades after the state Legislature banned residential development in Kakaako Makai, a spark of pragmatism could see two of the state's leading Native Hawaiian entities team to sidestep that law. It's an intriguing idea, to be sure.

The Office of Hawaiian Affairs' (OHA) board of trustees this month voted to negotiate with the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands (DHHL) on a potential housing project eyed for a 3-acre parcel, part of OHA's 31 total acres in Kakaako. That swath of land south of Ala Moana Boulevard has been designated by state law as a no-go zone for residential construction, and OHA has struggled to make good use of the property since taking ownership from the state as part of a ceded-land settlement in 2012.

Multiple attempts to develop affordable housing in the space — standalone, as part of a multi-use space or pitched as go-alongs with larger urban corridor projects such as Skyline — have failed to pass legislative muster. The most recent bid to flip the prohibition withered on the vine in February, when Senate Bill 534 proposing affordable housing at Kakaako Makai died in committee. It was a particularly short-lived attempt, as that chamber in past years had approved of OHA's overtures only to see bills fail in the House, where former Rep. Scott Saiki, an ardent opponent of the Kakaako development concept, consistently halted forward movement.

SB 534 was a plan that sought to harness residential income as a means to buttress programs and services for Native Hawaiian advancement. Limited development would simultaneously ease burdens of local government by creating prime workforce housing and, importantly, affordable options guaranteed for Hawaii residents. But many in the community bristled at the notion of Kakaako Makai towers reaching up to 400 feet high, or double current limits for the area, and the idea of affordable housing taking up prime real estate. In any case, Senate committee chairs disagreed with draft changes and tabled the legislation indefinitely.

Some eight months later, OHA is once again pressing, this time in tandem with DHHL and that agency's authority to override state and county land-use regulations. Under the tentative OHA-DHHL proposal, the Kakaako parcel dubbed "Lot I" and currently rented out for vehicle storage would hold a condominium tower, reportedly to be operated in a similar vein to DHHL's 23-story Hale Moiliili project next to Old Stadium Park. Plans could change, but this suggests rentals rather than ownership. It's disappointing that available units won't go directly toward whittling down DHHL's homestead waitlist, which stood at about 29,000 individuals as of March, but filling housing needs as a stopgap to meting out permanent dwellings is a step in the right direction.

The proposed partnership is a savvy one that serves both OHA and DHHL beneficiaries, and comes at a time when DHHL is under pressure to deliver on homestead promises. The first shoe dropped when the Legislature passed Act 279, or the "Waitlist Reduction Act," in 2022 and with it \$600 million of fresh funding for DHHL to develop lots and housing. Then earlier this year, the Trump administration threatened to eliminate the Native Hawaiian Housing Block Grant program for disuse of millions in federal funds. DHHL must take concrete action to fulfill its duty and apply that money toward the removal of names that have been on the waiting list for far too long.

Much can change in 19 years, and it has. Sentiment on affordable housing — its need, proliferation and availability — has shifted, with more residents viewing such projects favorably, if not going so far as to advocate for construction in their backyards. And attitudes toward DHHL and its mission are complementary. Now is an ideal time to lean on public amity and test the waters with a well-negotiated strategy for affordable residential housing in Kakaako Makai that is limited in scope, but big on impact for the Native Hawaiian community.