

OHA slams House leaders for blocking Kakaako project

By Timothy Hurley
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The Office of Hawaiian Affairs board of trustees Friday blasted the leadership of the state House of Representatives, calling their actions to block OHA's proposed Kakaako Makai development arbitrary, disrespectful and undemocratic.

In a news conference at OHA's Iwilei headquarters, Chair Carmen Hulu Lindsey criticized House Speaker Scott Saiki and the House's committee chairs for refusing to hold a hearing on "the Hakuone bill" for the second year in a row.

"We are appalled that our 300,000 beneficiaries were deliberately silenced once again," Lindsey said.

The Hakuone bill, she said, was one of several OHA funding and support measures that died at the Capitol despite most

clearing hurdles right up until the final deadline. This includes \$65 million in funding for infrastructure repairs to the Kakaako waterfront due to decades of state neglect and a substantial attempt to catch up with the state's Public Land Trust obligations.

Lindsey, with four other trustees by her side, said OHA couldn't let "one of the most dysfunctional legislative sessions in recent history" end without comment.

While a bill that would allow OHA's residential towers found acceptance in the Senate, she said, there was no such aloha in the House.

"The arbitrary killing of OHA's proposal in the House without even being afforded a hearing after garnering substantial support signals a high-water mark of disrespect," Lindsey said. "We at

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OHA believe democracy is being seriously undermined and that all voters should sit up and take notice."

The nine Kakaako Makai parcels were conveyed to OHA in 2012 to settle unpaid ceded-land revenue in lieu of \$200 million. The land came with a 2006 Legislature-approved ban on residential towers.

Since then OHA has sought to reverse the ban three times before this year. Each time, lawmakers declined to remove the ban.

This year OHA made a concerted push to sway public opinion in favor of a project it is calling Hakuone. As described by OHA, the project would be a mixed-use development that would create a Hawaiian sense of place, incorporate culture and commerce, and draw the community to a revitalized urban core. It would include at least two residential towers, each 400 feet tall.

Asked to respond to OHA's news conference, Saiki issued a statement saying he and his colleagues "kept an open door to OHA" and hoped there would be productive discussions.

"However, OHA has not provided specific development plans or explained why it is in the public's interest to repeal the residential restrictions at Kakaako Makai that were in place when OHA accepted the land.

"I have made good faith efforts to find a solution that would be suitable to OHA and serve the interests of its beneficiaries," Saiki said.

Two months ago Saiki came to OHA with a compromise offering \$65 million for wharf repairs, \$100 million in cash and an increase to the annual ceded-lands



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Carmen Hulu Lindsey
OHA chair



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trust proceeds, in exchange for an easement to maintain open space by preserving the residential ban at Kakaako Makai.

"OHA rejected this offer and has not returned to the table to continue discussions. However, I am still willing to discuss this important issue with them."

Hawaii island trustee Mililani Trask said Friday that the deal was simply unacceptable, especially as the estimated value of the land has grown to more like \$400 million.

"We are trustees with a fiduciary obligation. The law is clear: We need to seek the highest and best use for the land," she said.

Trask said evidence suggests systemic racism has something to do with the opposition to Hakuone.

She said that "brown skins" are not wanted in the neighborhood, and she referenced published research that described a 40-year-old environmental document that indicated that Kakaako

planners had decided a successful transformation of the area would cater to the affluent and would be unlikely to include Hawaiians and working-class families.

But at-large trustee Keli'i Akina said he didn't think racism against Hawaiians is the primary reason why residential towers cannot be built on the makai side of Kakaako. He said the restriction was put in place before OHA chose to acquire the property.

"OHA's strongest argument for repealing the height restriction is the project's merits," he said. "Developing residential towers will help address Honolulu's critical housing shortage, and OHA can use the resulting revenues to meet the needs of Hawaiians."

Akina said OHA made headway this year persuading people about the project's benefits.

"This year we saw the conversation about OHA and the Hawaiian people elevated to where it has never been," he said. "The whole state was talking about the needs of Hawaiians and the Hakuone development."

OHA's own research, he said, showed that the majority of those surveyed believed Hakuone should be developed and that it would be good not only for Native Hawaiians, but everyone.

"It's simply a great project. It takes away the blight of the undeveloped area and gives Honolulu a centerpiece which everyone can be proud of."

Akina said Hakuone would be a powerful economic engine to meet the needs of Hawaiians — for housing, jobs, education and health care.

"That would not only be good for Hawaiians, but it would relieve the burden that the taxpayers and the state carry for the needs of Hawaiians," he said.