

LOCAL NEWS

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Ho'opili weighs jobs, homes alongside traffic, farm land

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As members of the state Land Use Commission ponder approval for the proposed 11,750-unit Ho'opili community, they are being asked to weigh the creation of thousands of new homes with concerns about traffic and the loss of agricultural lands.

The state Office of Planning is raising issues about the traffic and other concerns about Ho'opili in an LUC hearing that began yesterday and will continue today.

Meanwhile, most of those offering testimony before the commission yesterday said they support the project because it will provide opportunities for new homes, jobs and services for the fastest growing region on O'ahu.

Developer D.R. Horton-Schuler Homes LLC wants an OK from the commission to build up to 11,750 residential units on 1,554 acres between Kapolei, 'Ewa and Waipahu. Also planned are business, commercial and light industrial uses as well as schools, parks and open spaces as a part of an integrated mixed-use community.

The plan's progress is being closely watched. While there's disagreement over whether there will be more pluses or minuses, no one denies that a community the size of Mililani or Hawai'i Kai will have a huge impact on the communities around it.

City planners, meanwhile, have designated Ho'opili as one of three spots in East Kapolei where there is to be a train station and related development for the city's \$5.4 billion rail-transit project.

While the Ho'opili property is identified by the city General Plan and 'Ewa Development Plan for urban uses, the project must still obtain rezoning from the Honolulu City Council in addition to the LUC urban classification.

The LUC hearing is expected to continue today, and again for two days next month. A decision is not expected until late spring at the earliest.

MORE ANSWERS SOUGHT

Abbey Seth Mayer, director for the state's planning office, said his agency supports the developer's request for urban designation, but added that the developer should provide more answers on several community concerns including traffic, loss of agricultural lands, and stormwater drainage.

Mayer pointed out that the developer's own environmental impact statement points to several intersections and freeway interchanges rated as being unacceptable during peak morning and afternoon hours even without the project.

"This project, along with other major developments proposed in the region, will further exacerbate congestion on the surrounding transportation system," Mayer said.

Dean Uchida, a Horton-Schuler Homes vice president for the Ho'opili project, said in an e-mail that Horton-Schuler Homes officials "have been actively meeting with the state Department of Transportation and we are working to address their concerns."

'Ewa Beach resident Glenn Oamilda told commissioners that the traffic is taking a financial, psychological and physical toll on area residents.

The Ho'opili project would be at the entryway to H-1 for 'Ewa and 'Ewa Beach residents, Oamilda said.

"It's like damming the river upstream where people downstream cannot get to the water," he said.

"It's the same concept. They're blocking us from getting to the freeway."

HIGHWAY IMPROVEMENTS

The developer and its supporters previously have stated that a number of improvements are slated to be completed in the next few years, among them the North-South Road and an accompanying H-1 interchange, as well as a widening of Fort Weaver Road from four to six lanes.

Horton-Schuler Homes officials have also said they are ready to pay their fair share of transportation improvements in the region.

Further, they've pointed out that the project is designed to be a mixed-use community where people can live, work and play without getting into their cars.

Already incorporating live-work units at its Mehana project in Kapolei, Horton-Schuler Homes said up to 5,100 of its units may end up being low to medium density live-work residential units.

Those testifying in support of the project yesterday said they like that concept.

Kurt Fevella, chairman of the 'Ewa Neighborhood Board, said the project would provide amenities not just for current West O'ahu residents, but future generations as well.

"I have a 4-year-old daughter and I want her to stay here and not go to the Mainland," Fevella said.

The three surrounding neighborhood boards — Waipahu, 'Ewa and Makakilo/Kapolei/ Honokai Hale — have not taken positions on the project. But the chairpeople for the Waipahu and Makakilo-Kapolei boards — Richard Oshiro and Maeda Timson, respectively — also offered testimony endorsing the project.

Timson said the task force meetings have been productive and that Horton-Schuler Homes officials have listened and worked to address community concerns.

Leonard Leong of Royal Contracting said in written testimony that his company has already had to lay off workers and cut the hours of those left. "Ho'opili represents thousands of jobs and an investment of tens of millions of private dollars," Leong said.

13.7% OF FARM LAND

Mayer, in his written report, also pointed out that a majority of the land being eyed for Ho'opili is now home to four farms, among them the 1,000-acre Aloun Farms.

"The proposed project will result in the direct loss of approximately 1,497 acres of agricultural land being leased for various agricultural operations," Mayer said.

The farmers entered into their lease agreements with the understanding that the long-term plans for their acreage called for urban uses.

Horton-Schuler has agreed to help Aloun relocate and is working with the farm owner to gradually phase out agricultural uses only as needed by the development.

The state Department of Agriculture made no recommendation for the Ho'opili project but pointed out to commissioners that they should consider that the 1,500 acres of ag land represents 13.7 percent of O'ahu's available farm land.

Plans call for the project to be built out in increments over 20 years, with between 4,000 and 6,250 units and between 400,000 and 800,000 square feet of mixed use/live-work commercial space in the first decade.

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