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Ho'opili input welcome

West O'ahu community would add homes but may increase traffic

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The public has until Friday to weigh in on the draft report for the proposed Ho'opili community on what's now 1,555 acres of active farm land in the heart of West O'ahu.

With up to 11,750 homes, Ho'opili would carve out a community the size of Mililani or Hawai'i Kai bordered by Waipahu to the east, 'Ewa to the south, Kapolei to the west and Makakilo and Kunia to the north.

Critics point to an already congested travel corridor that they believe will only get worse as other developers continue to fill in new homes in booming communities surrounding Ho'opili. They also decry the notion of displacing Aloun Farms and other farmers from what the state Department of Agriculture has defined as prime farming lands.

"It's going to be a mess," said 'Ewa Beach resident Jeff Alexander, a member of the 'Ewa Neighborhood Board. "It's already such a bad drive anywhere on the west side."

Developer D.R. Horton Schuler Division, however, said it has worked with a group of area leaders to create a community where people don't just live, but work, play and go to school as well. They also point to a series of planned state and city traffic improvements, among them a new freeway interchange and the city's \$4 billion mass-transit project, which will be routed right through the project.

Makakilo resident Maeda Timson, a member of the Makakilo /Kapolei/Honokai Hale Neighborhood Board, said she's been a member of Horton's community task force that provided recommendations on the Ho'opili plan. "They took the time, the effort and the money to come into the community and say, 'Hey, we can work this out.' "

Horton officials said Ho'opili should be viewed as more than just a bedroom community. Approximately 145 acres are designated for business and commercial activity while 45 acres are set aside for light industrial and open space.

Even the residential sections are dually designated as "mixed use" areas or allow for "live-work" units. Michael T. Jones, Schuler Division president, noted that Horton has been having finding great success selling live-work units at its Mehana subdivision in nearby Kapolei.

The townhouse units allow for a small storefront on the bottom floor, leaving the second and third levels for living quarters.

Also key to the success of the project is the development of the city's mass-transit project. The first leg of the transit line is expected to begin at the University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu campus just to the west of Ho'opili.

"It's the one place that you can actually plan around the transit as opposed to actually needing to redevelop something," said Dean Uchida, Ho'opili vice president. "It's the one area where you'll have such a large footprint that you're really going to be able to put some very innovative, conceptual transit and land-use planning to work. as opposed to someplace like Pearl City or Waipahu, which is already developed."

Timson said Ho'opili needs to be looked at in concert with the rest of the West O'ahu region, not as part of an individual project. The UH-West O'ahu campus is expected to welcome its students to its Kapolei campus by 2010, and the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands is developing homes and a regional shopping center on its lands to the south in the next few years. A Kroc Community Center is scheduled to open nearby in 2010.

"It's not going to be like a Mililani or a Waikele type of subdivision," said Uchida, referring to the community as a "job-generator."

TRAFFIC OUTLOOK

The draft environmental impact statement acknowledges that traffic is an ongoing and increasing problem in the 'Ewa region.

But it goes on to point out that a series of roads will inter-connect with the UH-West O'ahu and DHHL projects, thus easing the traffic burden.

It also points out the upcoming North-South Road and H-1 interchange at the western border of the Ho'opili property, reasoning that it will help traffic in both 'Ewa and Kapolei.

Uchida said Horton will need to pay its share of the improvements, which would likely also include widening of Farrington Highway.

Alexander said he isn't buying it. He appreciates Horton's attempt at creating jobs in the community but is skeptical about whether it will be enough to off-set the amount of traffic generated by Ho'opili.

"All the roads that they're working on or have planned aren't enough," he said.

Celeste Lacuesta, who's lived in 'Ewa Beach more than two decades, said any traffic relief her neighbors anticipated from the widening of Fort Weaver Road from four lanes to six will be nullified by the slew of homes yet to be built in 'Ewa Beach.

Ho'opili, which stands between 'Ewa and the H-1, will only make the situation worse. "Everybody's going to get gridlock right back into 'Ewa Beach," she said. "And there are going to be more traffic lights. More so it's going to be hard to get out of 'Ewa Beach."

Timson said: "I think they're going to have to make it work, and that's the bottom line."

FIRST STEPS

In the city's 'Ewa Development Plan, which is meant as a guideline for planners for the region, the Ho'opili project lies within the "urban growth boundary" and is therefore eligible for development. But the project still has a long way to go and must obtain approval from the state Land Use Commission and the Honolulu City Council. The environmental impact statement is the first step in that process.

Aloun Farms, known for its diversity of crops from watermelons to sweet onions, has been leasing

about 1,080 acres of the Ho'opili property, first from long-time landowner Campbell Estate, and then from Horton. It leases an additional 700 acres directly west on property scheduled for development by DHHL and UH-West O'ahu.

Alec Sou, Aloun general manager, said the lease for most of the Ho'opili acreage is up in 2013.

Horton officials have promised to help Aloun relocate to lands mauka in Kunia or perhaps Waialua and, additionally, is working with the farm on a relocation plan that allows Aloun to move out gradually.

"There's so much underutilized ag land right now (on O'ahu)," Jones said.

Sou said mauka lands will be better for some crops, not so good for others. The overall impact of a move for most of his farm remains to be seen, he said, although he appreciates the assurances he won't need to move everything at one time.

Kioni Dudley, acting chairman of the Makakilo/Kapolei/Honokai Hale Neighborhood Board, said state Department of Agriculture officials confirmed for him that a majority of the Ho'opili lands are classified as "A" or "B" grade, or "prime" lands under the state's agricultural land grading system.

"To cover them over with real estate is just criminal," Dudley said.

Sou said the language in his lease bars him from opposing the Ho'opili project.

But he pointed out that old-timers from O'ahu Sugar Plantation once described the area under Aloun as "the golden triangle."

"These have been some of the most productive grounds historically for agriculture from the sugar days forward to diversified ag," he said. "It would be a tremendous loss if we're unable to come together to find a good substitute of such highly productive grounds because our need for sustainable, healthy food is only going to increase."

Henry Curtis, executive director of the environmental organization Life of the Land, said there are too many homes planned for West O'ahu.

"There's a question of how many people this island can handle," Curtis said. "That puts a lot of pressure on the resources we have."

Ho'opili "is going to be one massive sprawling development," he said. "I think we need more large open areas where people can escape from it all. I hope that's part of it. We'll be watching this one very carefully."

Horton officials, however, said with the expected growth in O'ahu's population, additional housing stock will be needed.
