

No place for green space

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"Highest and best use." In real-estate appraisals the concept is simple: However a piece of land can legally generate the most money is its "highest and best use." When the broader public interest is at stake, however, community advocates contend that the definition must include more than cold, hard cash, which is why a diverse group of activists is raising the alarm about potential pitfalls of the surging Kakaako redevelopment.

Groups such as Kakaako United, Friends of Kewalos, the Aikea Movement, the Save Our Kakaako Coalition and others are coalescing, rallying around core goals such as protecting makai land from residential development, demanding more affordable housing and parks in the mauka sector, and calling for the Hawaii Community Development Authority, which oversees the roughly 600-acre Kakaako Community Development District, to address long-standing infrastructure and carrying-capacity concerns.

Public-access issues, especially, are heating up as the Legislature considers bills that would allow the Office of Hawaiian Affairs to construct high-rise residential towers on parcels makai of Ala Moana Boulevard near Kewalo Basin, and the city explores redevelopment options for the Blaisdell Center Complex, on the district's eastern boundary.

"The best direction we can go in right now is to get the public completely involved. You've got this beautiful shoreline that can work so well for so many people, and they want to make it private residential. We've got to stop that," said Michelle Matson, co-founder of the Kakaako Community Planning Advisory Council and president of the Oahu Island Park Conservancy, who stressed that she was speaking only for herself. "And on the mauka side, you've got these luxury developers who want to develop highest and best use' and they are not being required to include open green space because that does not make them money. The public is being short-changed here."

However, Lindsey Doi, compliance assurance and community outreach officer for the HCDA, said that every project the state agency considers has public hearings, allowing for continuous input. Moreover, she said the HCDA's master plan for the district which includes 450 acres on the mauka side of Ala Moana boulevard, bounded by Piikoi, Punchbowl and King streets, and about 152 acres on the makai side of the boulevard, bounded by Ala Moana Beach Park and Pier 1 of Honolulu Harbor does require developers to provide some open, public space, although that could be promenades or plazas bordering retail outlets, "not necessarily the green grass that some people might want. Definitely we understand the need for open space, but we don't believe that simply green grass and trees should be the one and only answer. Why does it have to be a passive park?"

The two major landowners building residential towers on mauka parcels Howard Hughes Corp. and Kamehameha Schools envision providing about 3.44 acres and 3 acres of open space, respectively, Doi said. Over the next 15 years, Howard Hughes plans to build 22 high-rise towers on its 60 acres in Ward Village, while Kamehameha Schools plans to build seven throughout its 29 acres.

With Kakaako land running about \$190 per square foot which equals \$8.3 million an acre prices are too high for the HCDA to consider acquiring mauka land to convert to parks, especially with the large Kakaako Waterfront Park and Ala Moana Beach Park nearby. Both those parks are across busy Ala Moana Boulevard, on the edge of the district, rather than in the middle.

With Kakaako's population projected to triple to more than 30,000 residents by 2030, the HCDA is missing an opportunity to insist that developers provide more shady, green space in what is about to become "an incredibly dense, packed-together neighborhood," said Marti Townsend, executive director of The Outdoor Circle, a conservation nonprofit.

"It's crucially important that the HCDA, the state and the city ensure that we have not only a commitment to public, open green space, but also a commitment to maintaining those areas into the future," she said, noting that most cities require developers to provide resources for the public benefit land for parks or schools, for example before they are granted necessary permits or variances. "That tradeoff is the only way we can guarantee a high quality of life in Kakaako."

Larry Hurst, who has served 17 years on the Ala Moana-Kakaako Neighborhood Board, predicts that the growing population will eventually strain civic green spaces, such as around Honolulu Hale, the Hawaii State Library and the state Capitol, which are maintained at taxpayer expense and are not parks, per se.

"You'll have all these people moving in, attracted by these condos, and where are they going to take their kids to play, that sort of thing? The state missed the boat on acquiring land for this purpose years ago, when it was a whole lot cheaper. The point is that the developers are benefiting from public land and it's reasonable to ask them to step up more," he said. "I've even seen the lawn at Restaurant Row listed as 'green space' on HCDA maps. I'm pretty sure if you set up your lawn chair outside Ruth's Chris, they're going to ask you to move along."

Erin Kinney, a development manager in Kamehameha Schools' commercial real-estate division, said that Kamehameha Schools "has

dedicated a significant amount of resources land, money, time to optimizing the value and effect of public spaces on its Kakaako properties. In addition to the land dedicated to conventional park use at Mother Waldron and the Kakaako Gateway parks, we have made a conscious, continuous effort in our planning and development to create spaces within the urban setting specifically to provide people room to interact with others or just to relax on their own."

While parks and open space are important aspects "of the quality of life people look for in where they choose to live, the attraction of urban living is also about the activity and vibrancy of a place, along with the convenience and efficiency of nearby work, entertainment and services, and we feel we are balancing all of these attributes well in Our Kakaako," Kinney said.

Making good public use of existing parks, and integrating green space within new construction are among the goals of the burgeoning redevelopment plan for the Neal Blaisdell Center entertainment complex, on Kakaako's eastern boundary, a few blocks from the soon-to-come elevated rail-transit line that will traverse the district above Halekauwila Street.

The Blaisdell plan is in the very early stages, boosted by a panel from the nonprofit Urban Land Institute's Daniel Rose Center for Public Leadership. The panel is advising the city, free of charge, about how to create a vibrant arts and culture corridor anchored by the Blaisdell complex, which is close to the Honolulu Museum of Art, the museum's art school, Thomas Square Park and McKinley High School.

Honolulu was one of four U.S. cities the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit decided to assist this year, providing expertise for a year aimed at helping the city follow best practices and develop public-private partnerships to fund the work. A nine-member panel is in town now, and has met with dozens of stakeholders, including Mayor Kirk Caldwell, and held a public meeting to discuss preliminary recommendations.

Chris Kurz, chairman of the panel, said the immediate need is to upgrade the 50-year-old arena and related facilities, while the long-term need "is to recognize that there will be developmental pressure on this area, so how do you preserve the green and make this a really warm and inviting place to come for the culture and the arts?"

Kurz said that open, shady green space "is an incredibly important ingredient to any successful development. Having green areas where you can get together is very important and I would say even more so today, because the millennial generation is so focused on that," he said. "If you thought sustainability was important before the recession, it's even more important now. The millennials may not yet be the CEOs, but they are driving the bus."

Youthful recognition of the great outdoors as being vital to public health and welfare could boost community efforts to expand parks and preserve mauka-makai views and ocean access in Kakaako, such as those led by the Save Our Kakaako Coalition, which includes dozens of smaller groups of surfers and bodyboarders, fisherman, divers, environmentalists, Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners, small-business owners and others opposing the potential construction of high-rise housing developments in Kakaako Makai, near a popular, public ocean-recreation area.

The coalition successfully blocked development of the same land by Alexander & Baldwin in 2006, when the state Legislature passed a law outlawing residential development on the parcels, which were already subject to height limits. OHA later accepted the land as the state's payment to settle the long-standing ceded lands dispute. Now the state agency wants to be exempt of the restrictions, insisting that it cannot realize the full \$200 million value of the land otherwise. Pending legislation, which Gov. Neil Abercrombie supports, would grant the exemptions.

Some of the same groups have renewed their opposition, uniting against the possibility of high-rise condos in Kakaako on the ocean side of Ala Moana Boulevard, and standing firm in their "kuleana for our keiki and their keiki."

Ron Iwami, president of the nonprofit Friends of Kewalos and a leader of the coalition, said that children who have grown up bodysurfing at Point Panic and are now young adults are active in the coalition. "They were kids the first time around (in 2005-2006), but now they are growing up, they can vote and they are getting active," he said. "Our worst fear is that if an exception is allowed to build residential on the makai side for this landowner, then other landowners will ask for exceptions too and before you know it, the law is void. All we're asking is to keep this oceanfront land in urban Honolulu residential-free for all the people to enjoy, now and for future generations."

• Caption: KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / KMARCELLUS@STARADVERTISER.COM The view from the Symphony Honolulu construction site on Kapiolani Boulevard shows an unbroken landscape of building and pavement. KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / KMARCELLUS@STARADVERTISER.COM The limited amount of green space in Kakaako identified by the Hawaii Community Development Authority includes McKinley High School, next to the Blaisdell Arena. Community activists worry that HCDA and developers aren't interested in adding public, open green space to their development projects. [CLICK HERE: ENLARGE CHART](#) KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / KMARCELLUS@STARADVERTISER.COM The view from the Symphony Honolulu construction site on Kapiolani Boulevard shows an unbroken landscape of building and pavement. KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / KMARCELLUS@STARADVERTISER.COM The limited amount of green space in Kakaako identified by the Hawaii Community Development Authority includes McKinley High School, next to the Blaisdell Arena. Community activists worry that HCDA and developers aren't interested in adding public, open green space to their development projects. [CLICK HERE: ENLARGE CHART](#) KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / KMARCELLUS@STARADVERTISER.COM The view from the Symphony Honolulu construction site on Kapiolani Boulevard shows an unbroken landscape of building and pavement. KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / KMARCELLUS@STARADVERTISER.COM The limited amount of green space in Kakaako identified by the Hawaii Community Development Authority includes McKinley High School, next to the Blaisdell Arena. Community activists worry that HCDA and developers

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