

Emphasis should be on getting Maui Island Plan right

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



It took a long time to get the Maui Island Plan to the critical point of County Council review, where broad public input can be heard. But now it seems that at this important juncture, the emphasis is on rushing it through, versus getting it right, and we at the Maui Chamber of Commerce, along with members of other groups, have fundamental concerns.

Following a review, the chamber's Government Action Committee offers five central recommendations. These were shared with the county and council long ago, and are still relevant in the review swiftly taking place. They are:

1. The draft plan is aspirational.

The draft Maui Island Plan often moves into micromanaging business interests and "wishful thinking" about the marketplace. Though laudable, many of the proposals amount to untested aspirations with potentially serious economic impacts for the business community and the community as a whole. No thought or analysis has been given to whether the county can afford what is proposed, and many of the objectives

and action plans are clearly outside the county's jurisdiction.

Particularly worrisome is an emphasis on adding new government agencies, services and regulations with no accompanying cost analysis. These could be expensive, impose a detrimental tax burden on businesses and families in Maui, and cause a business drain. Also, many of these added services and regulations conflict with the strong expression of economic diversification throughout the Plan.

• Recommendation: All new services or regulations considered should be accompanied by a cost analysis, the targeted funding source(s), and the cost and process of enforcement, with this information publicly deliberated.

2. Include missing population projections.

Population projections are the foundation of the plan, but the projections used are not presented in the document, and there are questions about how the housing projections for each region were derived. Minus this regional data, and from what we know of job growth on the island today and what is likely in the future, the housing needs forecasted and the locations for the housing are not in balance. Furthermore, the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands has West, Central and Upcountry Maui lands that will be developed over the coming decades, and the impacts of such development are not reflected in the plan.

• Recommendation: The plan needs to contain the regional population-projection figures used for the housing recommendations, augmented by projected jobs in each area, and taking into account the Hawaiian homelands residences planned, which then would form the foundation for projecting housing needs.

3. Use current business mix as a baseline.

A healthy, growing economy is critical for businesses to prosper, yet there is a "no-growth" overtone to the plan, particularly within the action-plan sections. At the same time, this "aspirational" plan seeks to create jobs, diversify the economy, keep talent on the island and grow most food locally — all worthy goals and the opposite of "no growth."

• Recommendation: Maui's current economy should be used as a baseline to understand what presently contributes and the status of those areas where the plan calls for growth, change and focus shifts. Regulatory and tax incentives should be added where not present, to encourage change in business emphasis.

4. Collaborate better with the visitor industry.

Maui is a resort community. There is no doubt that tourism is the major engine of the economy. Though the goal in the plan calls for maintaining a healthy visitor industry, the direction given by the proposed action plans contradicts that goal. Words — including "limit," "mitigate," "discourage" and "cap" — are used

to describe how this industry should be addressed.

• Recommendation: The negative bias toward the industry in the draft plan should be modified, and the county should collaborate better with the visitor industry.

5. Build greater flexibility into boundaries.

The chamber long has supported smart-growth planning principles, and many of these principles are present in the plan. But there is concern that the directed-growth strategy, as applied, could hamper industry growth and opportunity. The hard lines drawn around urban- and rural-growth areas — to consolidate infrastructure requirements and limit urban sprawl — are tight and do not appear to provide enough flexibility in the context of a 20-year plan, i.e., if new business opportunities appear that require greater space to succeed.

• Recommendation: In creating urban-growth boundaries, the plan should be flexible enough to adjust for the impacts of changing technology, possible new industries and future opportunities.

More work is needed. Ask the County Council members to address these issues before adopting the plan. It is too important not to get right, particularly in these economic times.

■ Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.