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Posted on: Friday, June 9, 2006



COMMENTARY

Now is the time for rational development

By Stephen Meder

Today, we are standing on a threshold in time for development in Hawai'i. Experience and consensus tell us that if we continue to develop the way we have been, we will be exacerbating many of the problems that we are currently trying to solve.

Traffic jams, infrastructure, sprawl, protecting open space, safe, walkable communities, preserving our limited land and resources and the opportunities for comfortable, affordable housing are issues that effect and concern everyone in Hawai'i.

Two years ago, our Center for Smart Building and Community Design, at the University of Hawai'i Sea Grant College Program, along with the UH School of Architecture, the EPA's Smart Growth Program and the City and County of Honolulu co-sponsored several days of workshops that were focused on

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collectively improving the quality of life in the Kapolei area.

They were very constructive sessions that were well attended by community groups, landowners and developers from the 'Ewa area as well as local professionals, representatives from the city's Department of Planning and Permitting and nationally renowned experts in the areas of transportation, planning, urban design and development financing.

The result of the meetings was a commitment to further explore development and regulatory options that would improve the livability in the burgeoning 'Ewa area.

In the past, we developed satellites of residential subdivisions that were automobile-dominated, disconnected from shopping, work and worship, and unfriendly if not unsafe for pedestrians. Our developments have not traditionally offered viable transportation options; they have ignored the natural assets of their locations and often overlooked the value of community input during their planning processes.

Today, with the last large tracks of available land being planned for development on O'ahu, it is our collective opportunity to comprehensively re-evaluate outcomes from the past so we may improve our approach in the future.

The Center for Smart Building and Community Design has been following the Schuler Division of D.R. Horton's Ho'opili development. It is a very large development. It will have a significant impact in the 'Ewa Plains, and as a recent article by Advertiser writer Andrew Gomes rightfully implies, this is the time to ensure that that impact is positive.

The team at D.R. Horton is taking the right initial steps to do that. They have hired two of the best firms in the country as their consultants, Charlier Associates Inc. and Van Meter Williams Pollack, to work with their local planning team of PBR Hawai'i.

They are integrating the existing terrain to enhance the natural assets for community parks, open space and pedestrian and bike paths. The community plan is designed around mass transit and various modes of transportation options that reduce dependence on the automobile and increase commercial and housing opportunities.

As currently conceived, Ho'opili is a community that will include schools, places to work, shop, live, worship and play. The development is expected to provide mixed price-point housing and much-needed affordable housing units. The developers and their planning team have been encouraging community participation throughout the process. This public participation is providing a reality and richness to the evolving designs that will inevitably elevate the long-term value of the community.

It is important that we critically and constructively evaluate the lessons from our past to improve our communities in the future. Our regulatory environment must encourage healthy development, not prohibit it. Public input and discourse, among all the stakeholders, is critical to overcoming barriers and maximizing opportunities to create desirable, affordable, livable communities as we cross the threshold to this next generation of development in Kapolei.

Stephen Meder is the director of the Center for Smart Building and Community Design. He wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.

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