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Kailon Tyndzik, Isaiah Moniz and Buddy Wiggins enjoy time outside at the end of the school day. Photo by Hillary Cramer

Undeveloped Country - Kamilo Nui Valley

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A vast sense of relief greets me as I slip into the bucolic Kamilo Nui Valley. The city fades from sight and I am suddenly aware of my breathing. Inhale. Exhale. My chest decompresses and shoulders drop. With urban sprawl plunging into the nooks and crannies of East Honolulu, Kamilo Nui is the last undeveloped valley in Hawaii Kai. Its open agricultural land connects the Ko'olau with Koko Marina and the ocean. A wild chicken struts by my car and a chatty group of birds chirp gregariously in the trees. If your stress level is peaking, the monotony of your routine is gnawing at you, or the kids are restless, a walk or bike ride through the valley may be just the antidote.

Kamilo Nui and the farmland behind Kaiser High School, both owned by Kamehameha Schools Bishop Estate (KSBE), are the only remaining agricultural zoned lands amidst the dense maze of residential neighborhoods in East Oahu. Surrounded by some of the highest priced real estate in the country, the Valley is outside the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) as per the city's East Honolulu Sustainable Communities Plan. Use of the land is a hot topic now as developers have offered lease buyouts to each of the farmers, and there are imminent lease renegotiations with owner KSBE. Many are opposed to

any further residential development or loss of open green space in Hawaii Kai. Community group, Livable Hawaii Kai Hui is involved in preservation efforts. Nonprofit group, Aloha 'Aina 'O Kamilo Nui recently formed to protect the natural and cultural resources of Kamilo Nui Valley and perpetuate its agricultural history. Kamilo Nui enthusiasts believe that the Valley hosts culture, history, harvest and sustainability benefits.

Longtime Kamilo Nui resident, Gary Weller supports the Valley being used as a recreational outlet and teaching tool. "Farmland should be an integrated part of a community. People should jog in it, walk their baby carriages in it, walk their dogs, [and] meet the farmers. There may be opportunities for farmers to hire kids. It may be a way for kids to get their first jobs," said Weller. On my afternoon visit, there are residents from Kalama Valley, Portlock, and Kuliouou walking and jogging through the valley. Hawaii Kai residents, Natalie Iwasa and young sons Orion and Asa, travel through on bikes, parking to leisurely explore the stream and visit the Ni'i Nursery. Walkers and joggers cut from Hawaii Kai Drive through the Valley to Lunalilo Home Road for a tranquil and traffic-free outing.

Judy Ni'i is working among a sea of potted plants and down the path is her daughter, Marilyn Ni'i, a third generation Ni'i born and raised in the Valley. Marilyn greets us. She shares about her family's history farming in Kamilo Nui. Marilyn is currently modernizing the Ni'i Nursery with computer technology and hopes the Valley will remain in agriculture. Nonprofit, Aloha 'Aina 'O Kamilo Nui is working to create partnerships with the farmers, schools and community and encourage educational programs such as the Jack Johnson funded program, 'Aina in the Schools. 'Aina in the Schools promotes "growing healthy keiki, schools, and communities" through its Farm to School Movement. KSBE Giorgio Caldarone, of the Land Asset Management Division, commented that while Kamehameha cannot force a lessee to participate in educational endeavors, they are very open to having educational programs being run on the land.

Hawaiian language teacher and Kuliouou resident, Kekoa Wong, describes Kamilo Nui as a classroom rich with knowledge. "Kamilo Nui Valley is a living example of the past and if nurtured correctly, lessons about our Hawaiian ancestors' way of life and stewardship of the land can be explored, demonstrated and taught...We should take care of the land because it will take care of us," said Wong.

Thinking of land as a protector and provider, Kamilo Nui's agricultural production and watershed qualities stand out as valuable resources. University of Hawaii, Sea Grant College Program Extension Agent, Peter Rappa shared, "The working farm lots of Kamilo Nui play an important role in the concept of sustainability and we should not be so cavalier to develop those lands." Sweet corn, onions, vanilla, lettuce, mango, citrus, banana, lychee, native flowers and plants are among the crops grown and sold to markets across Oahu. The watershed is the ability of a land area to drain rainwater into a particular body of water. Watershed minimizes flooding potential. Rappa and environmental expert Jackie Miller emphasize the eco value of watershed. "[T]he farms provide a major, natural rainwater catchment area so that water infiltrates into the ground under modest rainfall conditions and that under extreme rainfall condition it is easier to control runoff from a small number of farm lands than a large urbanized area with impervious surfaces," said Miller. Watershed is recognized as valuable by the federal government and there are significant federal funding programs available for protection and restoration of watersheds. According to Rappa, the watershed also protects the water quality of Kuaupa Pond (Hawaii Kai Marina) and Maunalua Bay.

Before residential development could be erected in Kamilo Nui, a developer would need to contend with the community; have 100 percent consensus from the farmers; gain approval from the City Council, The Planning Commission, and Department of Planning and Permitting to

amend the UGB outward for the Valley to be within the urban district; and then gain approval for residential zoning.

The future of Kamilo Nui is yet to be determined. Young and old have strong opinions on this one. The Kamilo Nui issue has been covered in countless newspaper articles informing residents of the factors to consider. Where do you stand?

As I am enjoying the pastoral escape of Kamilo Nui, mosquito bites rudely appear on my ankles. This hastens me to my car and I retreat back to the city, stopping for a coffee at Hawaii Kai coffee shop, Common Groundz. A friendly staff strikes up a conversation and I throw out for discussion the topic of Kamilo Nui Valley. The staff and a few patrons in the conversation unanimously are fond of the Valley, favor its preservation and oppose development there. Mahina Chock, a fourth generation Hawaii Kai resident, shares, "It's the only distinct, remote part we have left in Hawaii Kai. Everywhere else in Hawaii Kai is super developed. I hope it's left like it is, simple and natural." UH college student Paul Balazs adds, "These farmers have worked these lands for years. There isn't anyone more deserving to be on this land than them. When you're driving back there, you're not even in Hawaii Kai anymore. It puts you back to a different time...into history."