

Bills offer hope for affordable housing

By Keoni Williams

I am a millennial who has lived in the same rental unit in Honolulu since fifth grade. It is increasingly difficult for local people my age to imagine owning a home in Hawaii. To increase our chances, we just need to invest in infrastructure and speed up development of affordable housing — but it's never that simple.

Two of the eight bills in the 2020 joint legislative package, Senate Bill 3104 and companion House Bill 2542, demonstrate that there is political will for developing more affordable housing, but support among the next generation seems to be lacking. One reason could be because we are stuck reckoning between our stigma of development and our need for affordable housing.

Development has become a dirty word, especially among the youth of Hawaii. Climate change is accelerating and bringing irreversible changes to our environment. Income inequality in the United States has reached levels last seen in the years just before the Great Depression. It's no wonder why "development" leaves a bad taste in our mouth.

When leaders propose more investment in infrastructure and expedited regulatory processes, our initial reaction is to stand in opposition. But by doing so, we decrease our chances of becoming homeowners. Developing

our land and fighting to protect it do not need to be mutually exclusive pursuits.

Responsible development is a space where both causes can converge. These housing bills authorize issuance of \$200 million in general obligation bonds, with proceeds to be used for housing on lands near the University of Hawaii West Oahu campus. This concentrates high-density growth along the rail line, away from lands we fight to protect.

They also authorize \$75 million in general obligation bonds for housing infrastructure on neighbor islands — an investment that could ensure young neighbor island residents stay rooted in communities where they draw their identity and purpose.

THE OMNIBUS housing bills contain many other components that may not fall as clearly within the realm of responsible development. Instances where opinions diverge are opportunities for our policymakers to listen carefully and decide what is best.

Updating the state Land Use Commission district boundary amendment process is one instance. Under existing law, any district boundary amendment that involves 15 or more

ISLAND VOICES



Keoni Williams, of Makiki, is former director of the Pacific Forum Young Leaders Program.

acres triggers the requirement for commission approval. These bills would increase the threshold to 25 acres or more, and authorize state or county departments to petition the appropriate county land use decision-making authority, rather than the Land Use Commission.

A component that gets to the core of our generation's dilemma is the creation of 99-year leases to develop multi-unit dwellings on state land. The success of Singapore's public housing model has ignited robust discussion among leaders in our state, and a hybrid version with Hawaii characteristics could be a worthwhile endeavor. But is the generation that would receive keys to these units in support of building them?

With strong support from Gov. David Ige, the 2020 joint legislative package — the first since 2004 — seems to have a high potential for success. But even if these measures are successfully passed, a greater challenge will remain: convincing young Hawaii residents that love of the land and support for responsible development can be mutually reinforcing causes.

It will be up to our generation to mobilize both forces as we chart a path forward.



STAR-ADVERTISER / 2018

Puuwai Momi, a 260-unit state-owned affordable housing complex near Aloha Stadium, was proposed for redevelopment with 600 to 1,200 homes as part of transit-oriented development that would increase affordable housing near the rail line.