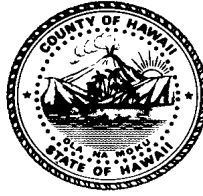


C. Kimo Alameda, Ph.D.
Mayor



Tristie Licoan, Chair
William Sanborn
Ruth Smith
Josephine Tanimoto
Julia Alos
Kevin McLaughlin
Scott Nagata, Vice-Chair
Vacant
Karen Anderson

County of Hawai‘i
SOUTH KOHALA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN ACTION COMMITTEE
Aupuni Center • 101 Pauahi Street, Suite 3 • Hilo, Hawai‘i 96720
(808) 961-8288 • Fax (808) 961-8742

May 19, 2025

Hawai‘i County Council
Hawai‘i County Building
25 Aupuni Street
Hilo, HI 96720

Subject: Recommended CIP Request for Community-Initiated Cesspool Closure Project. From Community Action to County Commitment: Investing in Reef Protection and Public Health in Puakō

Dear Chairman Dr. Holeka Goro Inaba and Members of the Hawai‘i County Council,

At its duly held meeting on May 15, 2025, the South Kohala Action Committee (“AC”) unanimously approved recommending a \$1,000,000 CIP appropriation to support a community-initiated cesspool closure project in Puakō. This recommendation supports both the nonprofit Puakō for Reefs (PFR, puako4reefs.org), formed by the Puakō community to address severe reef degradation caused by onsite sewage systems as well as the County’s Regional Wastewater Master Plan for Puakō and Other Communities within South Kohala (AECOM 2024).

Hawai‘i’s coral reefs are critical to its environment, economy, and culture. Home to over 7,000 species—25% endemic—they provide nursery grounds for marine life, cultural sustenance, and billions in tourism revenue annually. Puakō reef’s health underpins the South Kohala resorts - Mauna Kea, Westin Hapuna, Fairmont Orchid, and Auberge at Mauna Lani. The reef also sustains traditional Hawaiian cultural and fishing practices and is the strongest fortification against storm surge in the protection of shorelines and communities. Yet, coral coverage on the Puakō reef has plummeted from 70% coverage ~50 years ago to 7% today due to wastewater contamination. Decades of scientific studies confirm this trend, and urgent action is needed to avoid irreversible collapse below the 5% threshold, which is predicted within ten years.

This CIP request would launch a revolving fund, administered by the County Finance Department, to front the costs required to establish a Community Facilities District (CFD) for Puakō. Once the CFD is in place, its bond issuance (or USDA loan/grant) would repay the fund, making capital available for other community wastewater projects in future years. The Puakō sewer project—identified as a Priority 1 cesspool conversion area—will be the fund’s first and only use, until replenished by the CFD’s bond

proceeds, with estimated pre-construction and CFD startup costs totaling \$1 million, including detailed engineering, environmental review, and legal and financial consultation.

PFR has already raised \$250,000 in donations from community members over the past two years for initial planning, on top of the \$2,500,000 donated by the community since 2012 for scientific studies, design work, and community engagement. **County support is now essential to move into the project implementation phase.**

Protecting nearshore waters and closing cesspools are top County priorities. Puakō's low elevation and shallow water table make it the most critical site for action. Public access to this reef—via nine County-owned paths and the State boat ramp—makes this a shared resource whose protection benefits all.

We urge the County to act on this high-impact, *cost-recoverable* opportunity and approve this CIP request.

Respectfully,



[Tristie Licoan \(May 19, 2025 20:38 EDT\)](#)

Tristie Licoan, Chair

South Kohala Action Committee

CC: James Hustace, Hawaii County Council member, District 9

Karen Anderson, Board Chair, Puakō for Reefs