

Hawaii County General Plan 2015 Update Recommendations for Consideration

Summary

The following personal commentary is influenced by my experiences during the past two years as a member of the South Kohala Community Development Action Committee (SKCDPAC) , involvement in local community organization grassroots efforts, and past professional experience in organizational development.

My recommendations are from my personal perspective. Committee discussions continue, and my thoughts will be part of the conversation.

Please know that I believe we need a change in paradigm, particularly as it relates to County and State roles and responsibilities. View my comments recognizing that some of the recommendations relate to policy which may not be appropriate for inclusion in the General Plan and likely require long-term discussion both at the County level and in negotiation with State officials.

The overall objectives of Hawaii County's General Plan strive to enhance the County's economic, social, cultural, and environmental values. They also seek to prevent, minimize and mitigate barriers that are contrary to these values.

Quality strategic planning decisions for our island are best made with valid population growth projections, understanding the need to honor community identity (sense of place), always thinking long term and big picture, and knowing what reliable funding sources are available prior to taking action.

Effective long term planning requires that private and public sectors work with the general public to create partnerships, which work collaboratively in common cause to benefit all participants. This collaborative effort is particularly important in rural areas of the County. Long term planning is essential to ensure economic development, best use of taxpayer dollars, and ways to figure how to meet the challenges that we will continue to face.

Maximizing public agency coordination is a challenge. It requires structural change in the way governance is managed. Specifically, the roles and responsibilities of the County and State of Hawaii need to be clearly identified and reviewed. This is particularly true as it relates to long term planning for water resource management, waste water and solid waste systems, electrical power, land management, highways and roads, social services, and education and vocational training opportunities, and long term strategies for economic growth and development.

Funding resources, whether from the public or private sectors, need to be in place prior to the approval of applications for new development or expansion of current communities. Paying as you go is not a good way to grow.

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The County developer fair share commitment policy needs review to ensure land/facility dedication or required fair share funding is received from this source. Creating special assessment districts for new facilities and services rather than relying on general fund financing is needed.

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County and State Governance

I recommend discussions with the State of Hawaii relating to water resource management that enables the County to assume primary responsibility. This will require adequate funding for all Island water resources, including currently managed DLNR reservoirs, aquifers, pumping facilities and distribution systems.

Hawaii Island is large and highly diverse. The needs of rural communities such as those in South Kohala are significantly different from the urban areas of Hilo and Kailua Kona. It's important to consider exploring regional systems for other services such as wastewater, solid waste, and electricity.

Developing new long term energy strategies and resources is a critical component for future growth. Newly evolving sources of electrical power affect all utility services, particularly the cost of facility upgrades and the need for new operational facilities.

The concept of integrating local systems, whether publicly or privately managed, is likely more efficient and less costly on the long haul. Regarding a countywide strategy for electrical power—it is best to consider multiple alternatives of renewable energy that have a potential for expansion as well as leaving opportunities open for new technologies. Hawaii Island is unique in that there is potential to produce energy in multiple ways. Possibilities include: solar, wind, pumped hydroelectric, geothermal, ocean generated power.

County Boards, Commissions, and Committees

I believe that the organization and roles of County oversight boards, commissions and community committees need review. I recommend for consideration the consolidation of current County utility-related government boards and commissions including those involved in water supply, wastewater treatment/environmental management, and electrical power by creating a Countywide Joint Energy Commission. This Commission would have responsibility to recognize (1) the reliance that all utilities have on each other, (2) a need for partnerships in planning major projects, (3) act as a voice for the public in containing system expansion costs and utility rates, and (4) make recommendations to the County administration and County Council from a big picture prospective.

I also recommend for consideration the formation of a broadly based County commission with advisory responsibilities relating to Parks, Recreation, open space, oversight of agricultural and conservation land, and general land use planning. The intent would be to provide focus on big picture planning, common purpose and mission to ensure that our island values and community identity is preserved.

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Roads and Highways

It's critical for discussion to occur regarding County and State jurisdiction relating to roads and highways. This is where County Traffic Safety Committees can make a major contribution. Area traffic safety committees provide opportunities for public input regarding all traffic issues, including the expansion of traffic control and transportation systems. Decisions related to capital projects and funding allocations require direct local input from individual communities, local businesses, large transportation carriers, the tourism industry, and schools.

Many of our County roads and highways are under a combination of State and County jurisdiction. It is important that both levels of government work in partnership relating to road maintenance, repairs, and road improvements. This specifically relates to the planning and development of current and anticipated future needs for emergencies caused by natural disasters such as flooding, earthquakes, fire, and volcanic flows.

Our State legislators need to be more proactive in representing a local perspective in determining priorities for projects on our island, and act as a communication link to the State Department of Transportation.

Approval of New Development

Long term planning requires clearly defined development and growth standards that are flexible enough to respond to anticipated and/or unanticipated events such as climate change or other natural disasters. Specific examples of necessary restrictions to land use are coastline protection and requiring an adequate setback of a specific distance for new structures that will reduce the impact of natural disasters on the environment.

Planning Department review prior to approval of applications needs to consider changes that impact properties in close proximity of the proposed project. It is important to look at both the current impact of the project including not allowing the alteration of natural land features as well as what the area will look like over time considering future natural growth and future construction.

It is critical for new construction on properties in close proximity of cultural and historical sites to be thoroughly reviewed for its impact. These areas need to be clearly designated by the County. Special attention is needed that provides adequate review, including opportunities for public input, prior to County approval. This will not only protect these sites, but will also provide clear guidelines to developers prior to submitting proposals.

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Recreation and Social Services

A minimum of 20 years is needed in projecting population growth on our Island. Adequate long range planning for county parks, recreation, and social services is an essential ingredient to ensure that the quality of life and sustainability of island values are maintained. This includes having a strategic plan that includes regional, district, and neighborhood facilities and programs.

Thinking long term, it is important to view local regional parks and recreation/social services from a broad perspective, anticipating population growth and need before it happens. Parks, recreation and social services, are key components in identifying our island as special, and needs to be a high legislative priority.

Long term planning in Hawaii for many essential services require funding from the State of Hawaii. These projects often fall short of their strategically planned project deadlines. The State is not currently a reliable source for County long term planning for facilities and expansion of services. It is important, therefore, that the County provide long term **dedicated funding sources** that are reviewed annually as part of the County budget. Possible sources of income may include the issuance of special project bonds and development fees.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Trails

I recommend developers seeking approval of large properties include not only open space but also a plan to developing bicycle and pedestrian trails in their applications. Trail system use contributes to encouraging healthy lifestyles.. It also can enhance the natural beauty of the community.

These trails could be placed on the parameter of their property to accommodate public access and link to other established trail systems and district/regional parks. Trails can also be incorporated within the interior of the development for primary use of the residents.

Interagency Partnerships and Community Involvement

I recommend that the County, through designated staff and/ or County Council members, in partnership with local community action plan committees play an active facilitation role in helping implement the creation and development of a Community Forum Process focused on developing quality youth services. This can be done on a regional or island wide basis. The concept is to bring all the strategic players to the table including representatives from both secondary and post high school education, youth serving recreation agencies, service clubs, the business community, organized labor, police department, the local hospital, parents, local and state political leaders, and others interested in creating positive alternatives for youth and young adults. Working together in partnership

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not only benefits youth in general, but also the missions of the participating organizations and agencies.

In relationship to the above, I recommend that each region of the County do an assessment of both available public and private recreational and social service facilities. There may be alternatives to costly new construction. For example, more discussion and formal interagency agreements are needed to maximize the use of local schools and County recreation facilities by creating community school complexes. This is best for the State and County to efficiently and effectively use the taxpayer's dollar.

Communication and Participation

Increased citizen "participation" in decision-making needs to be a high priority in establishing much needed trust and confidence in government. I recommend the creation of a County Office of Community Relations that will work in partnership with the Mayor's Office and the County Council to create a planned community outreach effort. Its roles will be to keep the public informed of activities occurring in all County departments through the media, maintaining a countywide special events calendar, and the scheduling of regular local informational and open discussion town meetings with public officials. Creating this special office as a high priority will show that the County is going the "extra mile" in seeking citizen involvement and better define challenges facing the community and County as a whole.

I recommend (1) this newly formed office work with County departments to oversee the updating of the County website to ensure agendas and minutes of all County commissions, boards and committees are up to date, and (2) recommend that all applications for these public official positions be adequately advertised, initially reviewed and forwarded to the Mayor's Office for consideration and County Council for final approval in a timely manner.

Community Action Plan Representation

On the long haul, the CDP Action Committees should include representation from a cross-section of their communities such as community associations, local schools, the business community, Hawaiian Homelands and organized labor to work toward a broad perspective of what is needed for future planning and a mutual sense of community.

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Youth Involvement

Our youth are so important to the Island's future. We need to do what is necessary to make democracy and participation in the government process work. The trend of apathy and non-involvement in our political systems are currently a problem. Creating an action plan, in collaboration with local schools to provide knowledge of government organization and functions is needed. This could include the creation of an island wide youth council and ex-officio membership on County boards, commissions, and committees.

Other items which I feel needed to be addressed in the General Plan:

Define and map out cultural and historic sites including shoreline and mauka public access designations for perpetuity

I recommend:

The County work through the County Economic Opportunity Council in creating working partnerships with the State Department of Education and UH community colleges to develop specialized training which leads to employment opportunities.

Policy which supports, of music, arts and cultural centers as a high priority.

Centralized 1-stop social services centers for senior citizens, families, and special needs populations.

Immediately creating a 10 year Strategic Plan for recyclables to be reviewed annually by the County Council.

Taking a leadership role in strategic planning to create agricultural districts that include cooperative small farm marketing strategies.

Supporting non-profit organizations, recognizing their value to satisfy special community needs and as an alternative to direct County funded services.

Continued evaluation of taxation and property assessment processes to ensure fairness and provide adequate funding for County services.

Based on projected population growth, development of a strategic plan to ensure adequate police and fire protection staffing with emphasis on rural regions where response time is an issue.

Continuing, as a high priority, the new development of affordable housing for the resort workers, teachers, local business employees, and senior citizens.

Addressing the need for temporary housing and services for the homeless.

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Create a dedicated fund in the County budget for anticipated natural disasters, reviewing the status annually.

Further development of standards to ensure adequate parking for business and multi-residential housing projects

Increasing County staffing to ensure that properties are reviewed timely in order to bring non-permitted structures up to code.

Developing a plan for high speed Internet services for all regions of the County.

Working with the State, review juvenile and adult detention facilities located nearby, to work in with community colleges, and the business community to provide job training and potential employment after prisoner release.

Improving the County bus system to accommodate high school extracurricular activities, community college classes and other post high school classes.