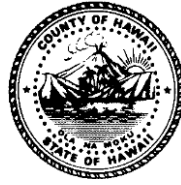


Dr. C. Kimo Alameda
Mayor



Erica Perez
Chair

Wesley R. Segawa
Director, Department of
Environmental Management

County of Hawai'i

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

345 Kekūanāo'a St. Suite 41 • Hilo, Hawai'i 96720 • Ph: (808) 961-8083 • Fax: (808) 961-8086

August 27, 2025

Honorable Holeka Inaba, Chair
and Members of the Hawai'i County Council
25 Aupuni Street
Hilo, Hawai'i 96720

Wesley R. Segawa, Director
Department of Environmental Management
County of Hawai'i
345 Kekūanāo'a Street, Suite 41
Hilo, Hawai'i 96720

Subject: Recommendation to Advance Puakō as a Model for Cesspool Conversion

Dear Environmental Management Director Segawa, Honorable Council Chair Inaba and Esteemed Members of the Hawai'i County Council,

The Environmental Management Commission ("EMC") makes the recommendation to use the Puakō for Reefs project as a potential model to help address cesspool conversion in Priority 1 shoreline conversion regions of Hawaii County. Hawaii County has 55,000 cesspools that leach 30 mg/day of raw sewage into our drinking water and oceans every day. This impact directly threatens human and coral health, shoreline, infrastructure, and economic security, as well as community wellbeing. We need solutions.

The Hawaii Dept of Health has identified Puakō as a Priority 1 Region for cesspool conversion due to the environmental impact to the nearshore environment. The Puakō reef has lost 90% of its coral coverage, falling from 70% to just 7% from outdated wastewater systems such as cesspools, septic tanks, and ATUs. With over a decade of research, engineering studies, financing models, and community support for sewerage, Puakō can be a model that will allow Hawaii County to expedite cesspool conversion at scale and address this environmental threat.

We recommend further investigation into using Puakō as a model for the following reasons:

1. Rare Community Initiative – Unlike most communities that resist sewer projects due to cost, Puakō residents have organized, formed a nonprofit, and raised private funds to initiate environmental, engineering and community outreach studies—driven by a shared commitment to reef protection.

2. Public–Private Partnership Model – This will be the County’s first sewer line connection to a privately owned wastewater treatment plant. Lessons from Puakō will help replicate similar cost-effective solutions elsewhere.
3. Community Facilities District (CFD) Learning Opportunity – While the County has completed several Improvement Districts, this will be only the County’s second (CFD). A CFD is more ideal for wastewater projects because it allows for the mixed income/economic status of many Hawaii communities. A CFD in Puakō offers a real-world test case for tailoring assessments to gain community buy-in.
4. Creates a Funding Source for Future Projects- Once the CFD is secured, Puakō for Reefs will dedicate \$1M in seed funding that can support other communities in cesspool conversion.
5. Work Force Development and Training- This project offers county workforce development and training of new technologies, such as low pressure collection systems and grinder pumps. These systems are another form to address costs and make conversion more affordable.
6. Impending Deadlines – State law mandates the closure of all cesspools by 2050, with proposals to accelerate the deadline to 2030 or 2035 for Priority I areas like Puakō.

The County has demonstrated leadership on cesspool conversions through its comprehensive Cesspool Conversion Plan and the forming of the Cesspool Conversion Task force. DEM stands with the County and supports this initiative to implement a conversion project in Hawaii County.

Sincerely,

Erica Perez
Chair

cc: Environmental Management Commission
(Attached are documents outlining the Puakō project’s status, the CFD process, and the support from partners and the community)