

Urbanization, commercialization of neighborhoods threat to traditional Maui.

VIEWPOINT by CHARMAINE TAVARES

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Many members of our island community have expressed dismay about losing the sense of security and community long enjoyed in their rural neighborhoods.

While Maui County has a history of supporting the visitor industry and vacation rentals in the hotel and resort districts, many of our residents are feeling pressured by the proliferation of unregulated transient vacation rentals in rural and residential communities outside the hotel and resort areas.

Left unchecked by the previous county administration, transient vacation rentals have grown in number to an estimated 1,100 units. Concern about the impacts that vacation rentals have on housing prices, neighborhoods and a sense of community is expressed in the current Paia-Haiku Community Plan, which states:

“A lack of affordable housing in the region affects a broad cross section of residents... The housing shortage is exacerbated by the conversion of residential dwellings to short-term rentals which, in turn, negatively affects the character of traditional neighborhoods in the region.”

This community plan was drafted by the Paia/Haiku Citizens Advisory Committee, recommended for adoption by the Maui Planning Commission, adopted by the Maui County Council, and signed into law by the mayor in 1995.

During the last year of the James “Kimo” Apana administration, the Planning Department began an effort to enforce the law as it relates to transient vacation rentals. After Alan Arakawa was elected mayor, all enforcement efforts against unpermitted TVRs ceased. Mayor Arakawa instructed the Planning Department to defer enforcement until a bill to legalize TVRs was adopted by the council.

Unfortunately, Mayor Arakawa never submitted such a bill. After many months of waiting for the Arakawa administration to act, the council’s Planning Committee eventually reviewed a bill proposed by then Council Member Bob Carroll in cooperation with the Maui Vacation Rental Association. During public meetings regarding the bill, many criticized the former county administration for not enforcing the existing law.

Throughout this process, approximately 70 applications for TVR operations were filed with the Planning Department. However, since the Arakawa administration was not enforcing the law or proposing a revised ordinance, many potential applicants

waited to apply for a permit until a new bill was passed by the council. Other operators decided to go ahead with operations rather than make an effort to comply with the existing law.

After many public meetings, the proposed bill to legalize TVRs was transmitted to the Maui, Molokai and Lanai planning commissions for review. When the TVR bill was before the County Council Planning Committee for referral to the planning commissions, I was chair of the Planning Committee. I announced that the work before the committee on the day of referral would not close down TVRs; rather, the actions of the committee that day would refer the bill for review by the three planning commissions.

As it turned out, all three commissions, comprised of citizens from each respective island, voted against adoption of the bill. In early 2007, the County Council also considered the bill and chose to file it rather than adopt it.

After the planning commissions and the council declined to adopt the bill to legalize TVRs, the Planning Department began to process the backlog of applications. The planning commissions and the council had made it clear that the county should enforce the existing law. We accepted that direction and moved forward.

Since many people applied under policies of the previous administration, they are being given time to phase out their operations while the Planning Department seeks approval of new proposed legislation. Each planning commission will have the opportunity to tailor the proposed bills to meet the needs of each of the three islands.

It takes hard work and a willingness to do what is needed to take care of our islands. We are challenged to find a balance among community, environmental and economic goals. Living in an island community comes with a responsibility to take care of our resources. Those who would prefer that state and county land-use laws be ignored would further urbanize our agricultural and rural areas and commercialize our residential neighborhoods. If we follow such a path, we could lose the very essence of our community.

I believe we must respect the desires of those who want their children to grow up in neighborhoods where people know each other. Our island communities were built upon the strengths of families who were bonded by friendship. Traditional neighborhoods are treasured because of the mutual support networks and friendships that form a foundation for everyday life. Let's work together to preserve all that we love about our community for today and for future generations.

Charmaine Tavares is the Mayor of Maui County.