

Demand high for new

Puna road

Big Island district leads state in population growth

by Hugh Clark

ADVERTISER BIG ISLAND BUREAU

KEA'AU, Hawaii — Two traffic accidents in less than two months that closed Highway 130 and stranded motorists for hours are fueling renewed demands for a second route through Puna.

"Something needs to be done," said Frances Akana, who was stuck in traffic for three hours after an accident Feb. 22 and for two hours April 9.

Puna is the fastest-growing area in the state, according to the 2000 census. Over a 10-year period, the area's population increased almost 11 percent, to 31,335. While the district has social and crime problems, many feel the biggest issue is roads.

"People are moving in like crazy. We've got to do something," said former councilman Al Smith, who moved to

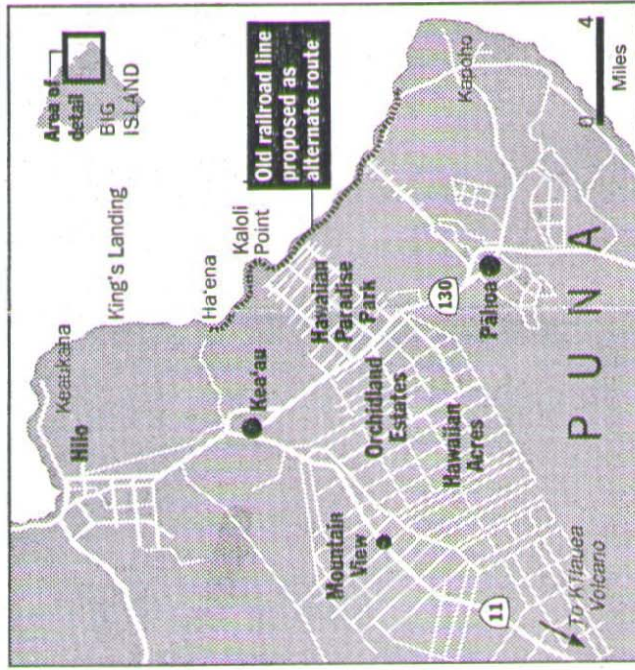
Puna in 1970.

The only access to central and lower Puna has been blocked numerous times in the past decade because of accidents and flooding.

The design of the state road is so bad that in December 2000, Hilo Judge Riki May Amano ordered the state to pay \$3.3 million to an injured driver because of highway inadequacies, including missing guard rails.

Concerns for an escape road were raised after major wildfires in the early 1990s trapped residents in the Hawaiian Beaches and Hawaiian Paradise Park subdivisions.

County Councilman Gary Safarik of Lower Puna said he had received about two dozen complaints after the recent highway closures. His request for \$250,000 to conduct a comprehensive study for a relief route was ap-



The Honolulu Advertiser

road there now.

Tony Clifford, a state Department of Health employee who works and lives in Pāhoā, said a reliever road is sorely needed. He favors making a road along the old railroad that ran along the coast from near Kapoho to Ha'ena, and would extend the route to Kings Landing outside Hilo's Keaukaha neighborhood.

Akana, Clifford's co-worker, was taking three mental-health clients to Hilo when she encountered a 7.5-mile-long traffic jam on Highway 130 after the April 9 accident.

She tried to avoid the mess by taking a route through the 'Ainaloa and Hawaiian Acres subdivisions. The road was built in 1999-2000, but has not been accepted into the county system because of liability concerns. It would cost \$13 million to bring it up to standard, authorities said.

Residents in Hawaiian Acres, where roads are privately owned and maintained, were unhappy about the rerouted traffic, since it cut off fire and ambulance

service. Akana found herself trapped again April 22 — this time for three hours near Kea'au High School — while police investigated a fatal crash on Highway 130.

"The people were very frustrated. They were mad and swearing," she said. Jon Olsen, chairman of the county's Puna Traffic Committee, said he is certain a road will have to be developed. He predicts Puna will have 66,000 residents by 2010, more than Hilo or North Kona.

Retired fireman Richard Finney, who lives near the former Kalapana village, remembers when he could drive the 10 miles from Pāhoā to Kea'au and see no other cars. Not anymore.

He said he never leaves his house until after 8 a.m., to avoid traffic, and always returns before the afternoon rush hour.

"The need (for an alternative road) is greater all the time," Finney said, noting the railroad route is best because it is already established.

Hilo goes back at least 25 years. Many Puna residents see the former Hilo-Kapoho rail line as a likely route.

Also suggested has been a road mauka of Highway 130 near the Orchidland subdivision, which would feed cars onto Highway 11 above Kea'au. There is an unpaved

proved last week by a council committee.

Public Works Director Dennis Lee said safety concerns would give a new Puna road much higher priority than other secondary roads.

"We have to come up with a plan," he said.

Talk of a second road into