

Council OKs General Plan

Chairman: 'This is a historic day'

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The Hawaii County Council on Wednesday adopted landmark legislation that implements land-use planning and strengthens affordable housing requirements.



"This is a historic day," Council Chairman Gary Safarik of Puna said after fulfilling his promise to have the county's General Plan updated by summer.

That goal was accomplished

months early when lawmakers voted 7-2 Wednesday in favor replacing the 1989 General Plan with a newer version.

The existing plan is supposed to be "thoroughly reviewed at intervals of not more than 10 years," however. That means the county's efforts, which started in January 1998, resulted in an update that is actually six years late.

According to the county Charter, the General Plan establishes the "council's policy for long-range comprehensive physical development of the county." Included in the phone book-sized document are maps designating the best areas to use for

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homes, agriculture, resorts and conservation.

All requests for land rezoning, subdivision approval or public improvements are checked first to see if they are consistent with the General Plan.

The latest changes include additional protection for scenic coastal areas, Native Hawaiian practices and agricultural land.

Most of the lower lands along the Hamakua Coast will be designated as "important agricultural lands" under the revised plan.

That designation didn't sit well with Hilo Councilman James Arakaki, who joined Hamakua Councilman Fred Holschuh in voting against the bill.

Following the meeting, Arakaki told reporters that there were no criteria to determine the best farming and ranching areas, adding the state should make that designation.

The important agricultural designation restricts development and makes it difficult to reclassify the land for other uses, Arakaki said.

"It's almost like putting land in prison," he said.

Holschuh took issue with the listing of public safety standards, such as 2.5 police officers for every 1,000 residents and locating fire stations within five miles of "concentrated settlement areas."

"If we adopt these specific standards, the county may be liable for instances when they cannot be met," Holschuh wrote in a recent letter to the council.

The council's other key action Wednesday involved adopting a new affordable housing policy by an 8-1 vote.

Intended to produce more lower-cost homes, the bill boosts both the percentage of new residences that must meet

affordable prices and the fee developers must pay if they fail to build affordable homes.

Some 20 percent of new homes — up from the current 10 percent — must be sold to people earning the island's median income, which last year was \$51,000 for a four-member family.

However, developers may designate as few as 10 percent of their new homes as affordable if they price them low enough so people earning less than the island's median income can qualify to buy them. Likewise, selling the homes to people earning at least 120 percent of the median income would require that 40 percent of a new residential subdivision be set aside for those buyers.

The policy will apply to projects of at least five lots or homes rather than the 10 under the current law.

New hotels that employ at least 100 full-time workers will have to build one affordable home for every four full-time jobs that are created. The affordable dwellings must be located within 15 miles of the new resort.

That provision bothered Arakaki, who cast the only vote against adopting the new affordable housing policy.

Arakaki said he wanted a greater distance to provide more flexibility regarding where the homes may be built. That would have increased the chance of affordable homes being constructed on homestead lands reserved for Native Hawaiians, he said.

Both the updated General Plan and the affordable housing policy now will be sent to Mayor Harry Kim, who is expected to sign them into law.

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