

# School debates taught lessons that could still be useful

## THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



Hot topics are upon us right now as we address multiple critical issues simultaneously, including: affordable hous-

ing and rentals with the Honua'ula (formerly Wailea 670) development; whether the Hawaii Superferry can operate while an environmental assessment is conducted; where transient vacation rentals (TVRs) could be allowed as we shut them down; how the TVR situation relates to home-based businesses and equally applied enforcement; the updating of our General Plan and urban growth boundaries; aging infrastructure needing repair; growing traffic; how we're going to handle water — the key to life and growth; and more. As a re-

sult, emotions are understandably running high.

Community meetings and council hearings are filled with hours upon hours of enormously emotional testimony on how these conditions are affecting us, with many heartfelt and gut-wrenching stories told. However, what's gotten bogged down in the current process (and something I feel is important to democracy) is informed debate.

Remember having to debate issues in school where the teacher split the class in half, with half pro and the other half con, regardless of your own individual positions? If you were lucky, maybe you got the side of the issue that matched your personal beliefs. However, I always felt true learning and understanding came from sitting on the other side and forming "arguments" (as they were called, possibly not the best word for consensus building) from the other point of view. It forced us truly to think through both sides of an issue; that is, to

consider the views of others. We were compelled to become educated on the subject matter to justify our opinions. One couldn't simply say, "I believe . . ." because you had to explain with rational, logical statements why you believed a position and how you arrived at that belief. We had to weigh the importance of elements of an issue. Through the process, based on research not hearsay, one became knowledgeable about the subject matter; either sharpened their opinion or modified it; and considered compromise positions. Looking back, it was a beautiful thing to behold.

Last week, at the public Honua'ula hearing in Kihei, many lessons struck me, reminding me of the value of the informed-debate process.

Youths came out, spiritedly participating in the meeting and passionately sharing their views. It was tremendous! You wanted to cheer them on because they did such an amazing job and because

they are the next generation, for which we are doing all this. Yet, there was surprise too; not in the youths, but in those who were advising and guiding them. It didn't appear that they were being encouraged to hear and be respectful of varying opinions — also important lessons. It seemed black-and-white, with cheers for those who supported their position and booing for differing views.

While efforts were made promptly to stop disrespectful behavior from adults and youths, cheering was allowed, possibly because it's often seen as positive, reinforcing energy. Yet, when allowed to go on, cheering can be divisive as well. In large crowds where the majority of the crowd is cheering to support its side of the matter, such demonstrations can be overwhelming and stifle people with divergent views from participating in the process. The latter individuals face being considered "not part of

the crowd." The adversity doesn't feel good.

A guest reminded me personally of the importance of cordial, informed debate. He had listened to hours of testimony on important project elements — water, injection wells, affordable housing, etc. — and heard mostly emotionally charged testimony versus research and facts. Then, he wondered aloud why experts in those areas weren't present to respond, promptly address a testifier's concerns, and provide education on the subject matter. He promoted a different process where county experts actively participate in hearings to present information, research and expert opinions. He said such a process allows for more informed issue discussion, greatly shortens the hearing, takes the process to a debatable format, and leads to solutions — versus ongoing discussion involving feelings — as the facts are ferretted out and addressed.

Bells sounded. However, I explained that the current process is designed to encourage many voices, allowing all who want to testify, even if the testimony isn't grounded in truth or fact.

Later, I realized that council members and those closely involved have a lot of research on these issues, information and expert opinions — not all of which is shared with the public. If we can get that information out, hold debates, address concerns as they arise, and include logic along with the emotion, then I believe we can expedite the process and come to balanced, positive solutions.

Our current path is dividing us. We all want the same things — good jobs, quality of life, a beautiful place to live in and enjoy, and a wonderful future for our children. The school debate process might be just the tool!

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