

Hot day, but not a hot decision

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



While there was a bit of a breeze, it was a warm day this past Tuesday, adding even more

heat to the unair-conditioned Paia Community Center, where hundreds gathered to hear the state Commission on Water Resource Management address the issue of stream water, how it can be used, and to what degree. It followed a December meeting in the same location, with the same challenges.

As before, the crowd was far too big for the room, there was insufficient seating, and the entrances were blocked by people hoping to hear what was going on. About a third of the crowd stood for hours, with countless outside in the hot sun, to be involved. Given the history and interest in this important issue, lessons should have been learned from the last meeting and Tuesday's event should have been moved to a larger, more accommodating venue.

Many present simply wanted an opportunity to be heard, but had to remain through a lengthy staff report to testify. Some also were frustrated by the two-minute time limit on testimony after waiting so long.

An attempt to let more people ring in on the issue without waiting was made, and those in attendance were encouraged to sign one of following three petitions to:

- Allow non-in-stream uses (meaning water could be di-

verted for various existing uses).

- Provide a balanced approach (undefined).

- Provide stream restoration (putting water back into the streams for "in-stream" uses).

We inquired as to what the "balanced approach" was and were told it still was still being determined.

While a Maui News story noted, "The lines were almost evenly drawn between people who wanted the streams restored and supporters of HC&S (Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co.) and Upcountry farmers who said the water was critical to preserving agriculture on Maui," we beg to differ. The story does not mention the petition results given at the meeting prior to public testimony. In the hopes of reducing the amount of time taken up by public testimony to give commissioners more time to deliberate, state Department of Land and Natural Resources board Chairwoman and commission Chairwoman Laura Thielen read the results. She reported that 220 supported non-in-stream uses (a majority, 3.5 times the next category, supporting to allow existing uses); 63 favored a balanced approach; and only 35 signed on to support stream restoration.

Add that to large constituencies of various organizations — including Maui Chamber of Commerce (with nearly 800 businesses including about 20,000 employees), Maui Hotel & Lodging Association, Maui County Farm Bureau, and County of Maui — that support off-stream uses, and a different perspective shines through.

Our members recognize that water is a precious resource

that requires careful consideration. We believe that decisions related to water should be balanced and incorporate a broad view, examining all possible water sources and resolutions, including new source development. We feel that the economic, environmental and social impacts of all options must be determined to set priorities in the best interests of all residents, businesses and the community.

We once supported the commission staff's recommendation of restoring water to one stream; however, their amended recommendation Tuesday sought to restore additional water for habitats, taking water away from existing users, despite the fact that they noted none of the habitats is currently under the threat of being endangered. True, habitats can be enhanced, but at what cost when taking additional water away imminently threatens the existence of many businesses.

By our count, we already have lost 100-plus businesses and thousands of jobs. We simply cannot sustain additional economic hardship. We must do everything possible to protect all businesses.

In the end, the commission returned some water to six East Maui streams, and all sides appeared displeased with the result to varying degrees.

From a business perspective, the decision signifies another hit on businesses (from small agricultural producers to sizable operations) and the people of Maui.

A commissioner commented that this outcome would be a "test" and that the panel would return to see how well it worked. Hmmm, we have heard the "test" proposal be-

fore. The Residential Workforce Housing and "show me the water" bills immediately come to mind. While people now see that those decisions require modification, damage already has been done. We pray Tuesday's decision does not have a similar ill effect on Upcountry farmers and ranchers, HC&S, other businesses, residents served by the water, and the entire community.

Maui is blessed with a considerable amount of water, but our water infrastructure is lacking. This election year, call for a solid water plan from those running for office and elect representatives who will fix the water challenges that endanger our industries, businesses, lifestyles and economic recovery.

■ Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.


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