

Testimony on Pulelehua split

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LAHAINA – Testimony about Pulelehua Monday lasted for hours, but most of it could be boiled down to a sentence: If traffic is the greatest problem facing West Maui, then Pulelehua should not be allowed, but if housing is the greatest problem, it should.

Because Maui Planning Commission rules require public hearings on a rezoning like Pulelehua to take place in the community plan district where the project is to be built, the commission moved to the Lahaina Civic Center. Every chair was taken, and more than 50 people lined the walls, about 200 people in all.

By head count alone, the testimony appeared to be about evenly split: 24 who spoke were solidly for Maui Land & Pineapple's 882-dwelling new town, 10 were firmly against and nine were hard to pin down.

Among the nine who said it depends, were two school principals, Kaipō Miller of Princess Nahienaena and Lindsay Ball of Kamehameha III elementary schools.

“We endorse affordable housing,” said Miller. But adding about a thousand dwellings (counting ohanas) would be expected to add 239 elementary students, as well as proportionate numbers of intermediate and high school students.

With Lahaina schools already overfull, Miller advised, “Consider building the school first.”

ML&P proposes to donate 13 acres for a school within its residential-commercial-civic community. The state would pay for the building, although ML&P has offered to manage the construction.

The 13-acre site would accommodate about 550 students. Ball said that would not be enough.

Of the more than 700 pupils at his vastly overcrowded school (where students have been holding classes under tents), 495 come from “Star Market out,” which is the general area of Pulelehua, which would occupy 310 acres mauka of Kapalua-West Maui Airport.

Ball said the new school should be designed for 800 students.

If only the Lahaina bypass were built, many of the problems anticipated with Pulelehua would drop away. Virtually everyone who spoke Monday was pro-bypass, but Anita Yamafuji reminded old-timers and informed newcomers that that had not always been the case.

The Yamafuji family operated Liberty Restaurant in Lahaina for 30 years, from 1941 to 1971 (famous for its “fried soup,” as its signature chow fun was called).

Pulelehua is to be of “neotraditional” design, with narrow streets, and compact, mixed

neighborhoods. In the commercial district, homes over businesses are contemplated.

That's exactly how she raised her three children and sent them to college, recalled Yamafuji.

She also remembered how "Mr. Cameron," the late Colin Cameron, head of ML&P, lobbied her to support a bid for a bypass, and how many local businesses were reluctant because they were afraid it would divert customers from their doors.

Instead of a bypass, Lahaina has a single highway, four lanes in parts, two lanes in other parts. At times, parts of it are backed up, although not particularly in the Akahahele Street area which would become the main entrance to Pulelehua.

On Tuesday, when the planning commission resumed its meeting in Wailuku, ML&P traffic consultant Jim Charlier said that traffic counts show a bowl-shaped depression around Akahahele: Counts are higher the closer you move down Honoapiilani Highway to Lahaina and somewhat higher as you move toward Kapalua.

Adding a thousand dwellings would certainly add more traffic, but the effect would be like placing an inverted bowl over the existing bowl. The traffic moving in and out of Pulelehua would be concentrated in the least congested part of the west side.

Anti-Pulelehua testifiers, however, were concerned about the effects farther out, for example through the pali.

Kim Ball, who has commuted from Lahaina to his business in Kahului for 22 years, said he was "speaking for everyone fed up with traffic . . . it's just gotten out of hand."

But on Tuesday, with almost all of those who had testified Monday not present, Charlier got a chance to argue to the commission that Pulelehua would have almost no effect on commuters between Kihei or Central Maui and Lahaina.

His traffic study found that "only tens of cars a day" that could be attributed to Pulelehua would pass south of Dickenson Street.

Building Pulelehua would actually reduce the number of cars on the long stretch of Honoapiilani Highway beyond Lahaina town, he said.

A skeptical commissioner, Jonathan Starr, asked him Tuesday to explain that again.

Charlier said the formal analysis did not even consider how many people would move to Pulelehua to be near jobs in West Maui.

People like the Eoff family. Terry Eoff testified that four members of his family work in West Maui but live in Kihei because housing is scarce and expensive on the west side.

They try to share rides, but differing schedules sometimes mean that four Eoff cars a day make the climb over the pali.

Eoff said he liked the design of Pulelehua, "but if they were offering to make the ugliest cracker boxes in the world, I'd still be interested."

Commuting has become an even bigger issue than when Pulelehua was first proposed two years

ago.

Willie Kennison, division director of Local 142 for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, said, “The ILWU has a huge stake in this project.”

He said 3,000 of his members work in West Maui, although many are forced to commute. The rising price of gasoline is an increasing burden.

“Our members would like to live close to the work site,” he said.

On Tuesday, Planning Director Mike Foley noted that the Wailuku-Napili public bus has doubled its ridership in the past six months, probably as a result of higher costs of driving.

Taking that effect into account, Charlier said, he felt confident that building Pulelehua would reduce traffic south of Lahaina.

He also was asked about four-laning more of Honoapiilani Highway.

In general, he said he’s against widening highways.

“It’s not a good adjustment to add lanes to an existing congested corridor,” he said.

The highest gain in capacity comes from the first two lanes. Additional lanes do not carry quite as much traffic, because of the friction of turns and other factors.

“It’s always a better investment” to build more roads instead of making existing roads wider, he said.

That is what the Pulelehua traffic plan would do, add a grid of mauka roads, eventually connecting with a proposed Department of Hawaiian Home Lands project to the south.

This would remove a large amount of traffic from Honoapiilani Highway, Charlier said, since the average trip in that part of the island is only three miles.

He calls this concept parallel redundancy.

ML&P’s noise consultant, Vincent Mestre, said Kapalua-West Maui is unique, because it bans jets, helicopters and night flights, the leading causes of noise complaints.

Even if the airport expanded to its maximum capacity (it is nowhere near that now), the noise footprint would be within state regulations, he said.

Commissioner William Iaconetti asked Mestre about safety, an issue with several testifiers the night before.

Studies have found that the majority of aviation accidents are on or near a runway, he said. Pulelehua’s design keeps the flight approaches clear of buildings.

As for the remainder of crashes, Mestre said, studies at Santa Monica, a California airport with an unusual number of crashes, show “no predictable pattern” about where they occur.

Other testifiers worried about where the water and sewage treatment capacity would come from.

Right now, county departments could satisfy neither.

However, on Tuesday George Tengan, director of the Department of Water Supply, said the county and ML&P are in negotiations and are close to an agreement.

Bob McNatt, executive vice president of Kapalua Land Co., said that 12 million gallons per day of water runs through the county's Mahinahina treatment plant, plenty for the million gallons or so the project needs.

Or, wells could be dug.

Testifier Dick Mayer had pointed out that there are 42 projects that could potentially add 14,000 dwellings in West Maui. He wondered where the water would come from.

It's first come, first served, said Tengan, adding that "if you are a developer, you should be very involved in developing water for your project."

Another of Mayer's objections was that the county is revising its general plan, and it is not known what that plan will have to say about further building in West Maui.

Foley said that plan is a couple of years away, but it will include "urban growth boundaries" to try to limit sprawl.

Given Pulelehua's location close to already developed areas and existing infrastructure, he said he could confidently predict that Pulelehua would fall within the urban growth boundary.

The Land Use Commission has not yet issued its decision on transferring the 310 acres from agriculture to urban, although it has completed the contested case hearings.

The planning commission is being asked to advise the County Council on granting Pulelehua a community plan amendment from agricultural to urban and open space, and for rezoning and phase one project district approval.

The council can change the community plan on its own. It could not act on rezoning until the Land Use Commission has moved the land out of agriculture.

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