

Ho'opili opponents gear up offensive

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Farmers, experts and others are expected to testify against the Ewa housing project

By Andrew Gomes

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D.R. Horton, the developer seeking to build 11,750 homes on prime farmland in Ewa, has put forward a strong case for the Ho'opili project since hearings began at the state Land Use Commission in October.

Horton received endorsements from two area neighborhood boards, the Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation and its biggest land lessees, Aloun Farms and Larry Jefts Farms, which would be displaced by Ho'opili. The city Department of Planning and Permitting along with the state Department of Agriculture, Department of Transportation and Office of Planning are also behind the project.

Next week the project's challengers will launch their counteroffensive.

The Sierra Club's Hawaii chapter, community group Friends of Makakilo and state Sen. Clayton Hee intend to present roughly 20 witnesses — from farmers to former governors — to help convince enough commission members that they should deny Horton's request to urbanize 1,554 acres of arguably the best and most productive land for growing food on Oahu.

"I think the LUC is going to have an eye-opening," said Kioni Dudley, a retired teacher and Makakilo resident leading the community group opposing Ho'opili.

To urbanize the property, Horton needs votes from at least six of the commission's nine members.

The local Schuler Division of Texas-based Horton rested its case before the LUC last month after presenting witnesses that included company officials and a phalanx of consultants testifying on areas that included housing demand, agriculture, traffic, water use and sustainable design.

Horton's challengers did their best to cross-examine the developer's team and government officials, but on March 1 they will go on the offensive.

The Sierra Club is slated to go first. The organization plans to have five or six witnesses, including the managing director of MA'O Organic Farms, Gary Maunakea-Forth, and Linda J. Cox, a community economic development specialist with the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources.

Dudley has eight witnesses lined up, including former Bank of Hawaii chief economist Paul Brewbaker and his father, internationally recognized horticulturist Jim Brewbaker.

Another Dudley witness will be Peter Apo, a Hawaiian cultural expert and frequent tourism industry consultant who is slated to testify about the harm Hawaii's biggest industry faces from paving over green space.

Panos Prevedouros, a civil engineer and former mayoral candidate who campaigned against the city's planned rail system, will also testify for Dudley's group. "We think of him as the (anti-) rail man, but he really is the foremost

authority on traffic,"Dudley said, adding that he expects Prevedouros to "blow holes" in traffic testimony offered by Horton and the state.

Hee will be the last of the challengers to go. The influential senator, who is also a farmer, will be his own witness.

Lending support to Hee with their own testimony will be former Govs. John Waihee and Ben Cayetano, according to Eric Seitz, an attorney representing Hee in the commission hearings.

One unwilling witness also will be part of Hee's case. Seitz said he had to use a subpoena to compel the head of the state Commission on Water Resource Management, William Tam, to testify.

The main point Hee has focused on in the Ho‘opili case is Hawaii's long history of policy protecting agricultural land — a policy anchored in the state Constitution.

Seitz said the Constitution trumps city and state policies allowing for urban development of farmland.

"Our position is, you got to be crazy to take land out of production that is not only the best producing land in the state but is producing food now,"he said. "You should never do that. You should build on other land."

Witnesses for the challengers, who can be cross-examined by Horton as well as city and state attorneys, are expected to testify over the next few months or so at commission meetings scheduled one or two days each month. The commission should vote on Ho‘opili later this year.

TRACTOR PROTEST

Public demonstrations have been a regular part of the battle over Ho‘opili. Members of the construction industry routinely attend state Land Use Commission meetings wearing brown shirts reading "Ho‘opili Now." Though usually outnumbered, opponents counter with green shirts reading "Save O‘ahu Farmlands." Both sides have also waved signs outside the state office tower housing the commission.

On Tuesday, Ho‘opili opponents plan to stage a farm tractor convoy through downtown Hono-lulu.

Ho‘opili challenger Kioni Dudley said the event dubbed "Protest of the Farm Tractors" will involve 10 or so tractors proceeding in a loop along Ala Moana Boulevard and Alakea, Beretania and Bishop streets between 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m.

Dudley said the tractors can't be legally driven downtown, so flatbed trucks will carry the farm machines.

On Saturday a rally featuring a farm festival is scheduled at Kakaako Waterfront Park from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Organizers said they plan to have a farmers market and artisans market with about 100 booths plus entertainment, hayrides and other farm activities.

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