

Advisory Committee Struggles With Long-Range Plan for Maui County

Sarah Ruppenthal

Maui Weekly

1/17/2008 12:00:00 AM

Patience wears thin as a six-month assignment evolves into a two-year ordeal with five postponed deadlines handed down by the Planning Department. “There is a great deal of frustration.” “We need to have a sense of urgency about this.”

There is an age-old adage that describes time as the healer of all wounds, but for the 25 members of the General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC), the passage of time has left some feeling battered and bruised, and as a whole, irrevocably fractured.

Assigned with the task of recommending a Maui Island long-range plan to the Planning Commission and the County Council, the diverse group of 25 residents has spent tireless hours considering past trends and future impacts of several infrastructural elements, including water use, zoning, housing and transportation.

In a public hearing held on Tuesday, Jan. 8, the Planning Commission convened to review the updated Maui County General Plan, listening to testimony from a panel of residents and GPAC members. After continuous delays in the planning process, public testimony was tense and at times emotional, as many expressed dissatisfaction with the slow-moving General Plan review process. The much-anticipated Maui Island Plan was recently slated for completion in 2011—at a rate that some say rivals a snail’s pace. For GPAC members, what began as a six-month assignment has evolved into a two-year ordeal; the committee has deliberated recommendations in more than 30 meetings, facing the disappointment of five postponed deadlines handed down by the Planning Department. And in the early months of 2008, it has become evident that both time and patience have been worn thin.

“There is a similarity between this plan and the Iraq War,” said an exasperated Wailuku resident at Tuesday’s hearing. “There seems to be no end to either one of them.” It is time to stop treading water, he said. “We need to have a sense of urgency about this.”

GPAC member Susan Moikeha testified that the Planning Department “never met a deadline,” recounting one occasion when officials said the draft was “too thick, voluminous and verbose,” suggesting that its physical size be reduced to “half-an-inch.” Visibly upset, Moikeha described the deflated morale of GPAC members, contending that many had become disheartened and “fed up.”

DeGray Vanderbilt, chairman of the Moloka‘i GPAC, expressed concern that the Moloka‘i Community Plan—which he said is ready to go—will be needlessly delayed due to Planning Department timelines. “It’s been hard for us... we have a good group [that] we are trying to hold together.”

According to GPAC member Stan Franco, the committee is “distressed,” suggesting that the commission consider funds to hire an arbitrary, outside contractor to expedite the process. “There have been too many stops along the way,” he said.

In his testimony, GPAC member Dick Mayer agreed, “There is a great deal of frustration.” He attributed staff shortage within the Planning Department as the cause of the gridlock. “The planning department is short-staffed, not under-funded,” he said. Department officials responded

to criticism by explaining their “hands are tied,” as a series of staff illness and emergencies have delayed the review process. But for many residents, the litany of excuses has gone stale.

“I realize there are circumstances beyond your control,” said Moikeha, “But there is a problem... it is going on three years now.”

Thanking each speaker their candor, Councilmember Jo Ann Johnson acknowledged, “We could all do a better job.”

However, commission members questioned if the internal dynamics and mechanics of the GPAC—particularly its sizable membership—might account for the discordance. Moikeha admitted that membership could easily be scaled down to 13 members, but for the most part, any internal struggles were quickly identified and resolved. “They are all great people,” she said.

Committee Chairwoman Gladys Baisa agreed: “I watched the group form, and as it took off, I was impressed by the quality of the members and input.” She said gravely, “This plan is very important.”

While Tuesday’s hearing may have painted a picture of a cohesive GPAC weathering the storm, a meeting held Thursday, Jan. 10, at the Kaunoa Senior Center in Spreckelsville told a different story. The committee convened to discuss the approval of a draft resolution that would prohibit new development projects and subdivisions in all categories—residential, commercial, hotel and agriculture—until the updated General Plan is adopted. Exceptions would include family housing subdivisions of three lots or less; residential projects of at least 100 percent affordable housing; and public facility projects, such as schools, public parks and roads.

The committee was careful to explain that the resolution was not a moratorium per se, citing more than 20,000 island units that had received entitlements prior to the resolution. Proponents of the resolution argued that halting new development would expedite the review process, while dissenters contended that such decisions should be made by elected officials. After a heated debate, GPAC members voted 14 to 7 to recommend that no new development projects be approved until the final review of the General Plan.

In a separate action, the Planning Department agreed to bar any developers applying for plan amendments until the updated General Plan is completed. While the final decision ultimately rests on the shoulders of the Maui County Council, it is expected that the recommendation will have a favorable reception in council chambers.

The atmosphere in the tiny room was perceptibly tense; several members could barely conceal their frustration—and exhaustion.

As the hours dragged on, committee member Thomas Cook noted the group’s failure to gain consensus and engage in collaborative action. “We are divisive as a group,” he said, and ironically, several heads nodded in agreement.

And just when the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees, Planning Department Director Jeff Hunt announced that the land use plan could be presented to GPAC as soon as February, but “I can’t guarantee it.”

His words were met with stunned silence, and as friction ricocheted throughout the room again, the group moved to postpone all GPAC meetings until a land use plan and map are presented.

Before the meeting adjourned at 10 p.m., one bleary-eyed member inquired as to how one would resign from GPAC—a not-so-subtle sign that some may have reached their breaking points.

Time may have been on the side of the Rolling Stones in their sentimental ballad, but for GPAC members, time serves as a harsh measure of much work yet to be done.

Copyright © 2007 The Maui Weekly.