

Important choices are before us

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



As we respond to snowballing challenges and face tough decisions, it is

time we take a hard look at actions that could have been taken to lessen the negative impacts we face, what has to be done to dig us out of the hole we are in to quickly recover, and the steps ahead to realize our vision for a sustainable future. We should ask the important questions, receive appropriate responses and actions, and work together to overcome obstacles and push positively forward. We are all in this together and it is up to us — businesses, residents and government — working in partnership because government can't do it alone and we need progress immediately.

The Chamber has shared concerns on several issues that we felt would negatively impact the economy and not achieve the intended goals, like the Residential Workforce Housing bill, with a high (40-50 percent) affordable requirement, and the "Show Me the Water" bill. We felt these bills would slow, if not halt, affordable developments and, in doing so, would negatively impact businesses and residents.

The Residential Workforce Housing Policy (a law slated to make a real difference in creating affordable housing and rental units) passed nearly two years ago, so where is all the affordable housing? Very few affordable homes have come about and the rules and regulations that were required by law to be written within 180 days are still due. Affordable housing and rentals are still a priority, but now it is even harder for residents to get a loan. Who will be held accountable for this?

These bills were passed at a time when the economy was good. They are examples of solutions that did not adequately address concerns identified and possible negative outcomes. For groups like the Chamber whose warnings fell on deaf ears, it was a frustrating experi-

ence. Many of our members worried about the impact of an economic slip back then, long before we experienced the landslide.

Great discussion was had about the level of visitor industry spending last budget session, with comments made that seemed to disregard the tremendous support this industry provides our entire community through a trickle-down effect. Remarks are arising again that reduced visitor numbers means we can decrease our visitor industry spending. This is not so.

Do they not yet feel the impact of a hurting visitor industry and not understand the requirement to boost marketing to increase visitor counts and spending? This industry should have our appreciation and backing. While economic diversification is being addressed, we must continue to sustain our leading industry. When it is down, we all feel the pain. Many workers are faced with shrinking hours and layoffs as a result. Amplified visitor industry spending is essential.

Equally trying is that businesses, the job-creation engine, are still under attack even as our economic challenges are well understood and there is no end in sight. Why would we not stop the bleeding and bandage our wounds? Why are transient vacation rentals still being shut down, with anti-visitor messaging circulating worldwide? Why is a narrow definition of home occupations proposed, when reasonably regulated home occupations could enhance our economy?

Why are we looking at an outdoor irrigation bill that would further sting hotels? Why are we considering beach access legislation that will cripple activity and wedding businesses? Surely we can find ways to solve issues that we agree on (such as protecting neighborhoods, residents' enjoyment of beaches, water conservation, etc.) in a balanced way. The time has come for broader, cooperative and cohesive solutions where all sides are heard.

We must also stop legislative measures that seek to increase the cost of doing business. The cost of doing business in Hawaii is already huge.

Many businesses are struggling to survive. Continuing to hit businesses with more costs, particularly in these grueling times, will lead to further staff reductions and business closings. We need a strong emphasis on economic recovery and legislation that provides relief.

Please ask elected officials about their plans to stimulate the economy, how we can work together in public-private partnerships, and what they will do to lessen the burdens on businesses so they can first stabilize and then get back to growth, expansion and revenue and job creation.

Leadership is key — in government, businesses and our

community. With this being an election year, we have an incredible opportunity to ask questions, get answers, and make important choices. Become informed and truly assess each candidate on what he or she stands for and will do if elected. Think about who will truly work in our best interests and move us forward and who will simply maintain the status quo. Help us protect jobs, our economy, and a sustainable future by electing business-friendly candidates that will work to keep Maui no ka oi.

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

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