

It's time for serious economic visioning, planning

THE CHAMBER VIEW by Pamela Tumpap



With hit after hit and the alarms sounding loud and clear, where is Maui County's economic vision and plan for recovery and growth?

Our unemployment is rising. Our No. 1 industry, the visitor industry, continues to suffer from lower occupancy rates. Small businesses are struggling to hold on, and a number are closing. Large businesses are under attack as well. Maui

Pineapple Co. is closing; the end of a historic company and of a longtime industry on Maui. Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co. faces large losses and water issues that the company has said may cause its demise. The coming colossal unemployment insurance tax increase in April 2010 — reported to represent up to a 1,000 percent increase — will hurt all businesses.

Great hopes for boosts from stimulus moneys certainly have been tempered. And there is widespread understanding that an economic rebound is still a way off, and we must hold on even longer.

So, what is our county doing about all of this? A number of things to be sure, but many people seek a comprehensive plan.

Recently, the county held its second renewable-energy conference, and the Maui Chamber of Commerce was pleased to attend. We long have encouraged the use of renewable energy, and support decreasing Maui's and the state's dependence on fossil fuels. During that conference, Mayor Charmaine Tavares stated that renewable energy was her top economic priority. Renewable energy certainly is for Maui a logical fit, one that most embrace and that should be pursued further. But renewable energy is but one avenue, and other avenues require our attention as well.

If you think the Maui Island Plan fits a comprehensive plan bill, think again. As this plan went through various review processes, with a lot of community involvement and work put into it, we have had concerns about how the county would achieve a functional plan that can be implemented

well and utilized.

Years have gone into developing the Maui Island Plan, culminating in the Planning Directors Report of October 2009, which was submitted to the County Council. This 550-page report, available on the county Web site, is so voluminous, it is broken into multiple sections that some would say are not digested easily. The report is much longer than the 26-page General Plan Update of 1990.

In this new report, the planning director provides 52 pages of recommendations covering seven plan elements: Population (one page), Heritage Resources (13), Economic Development (nine), Housing (four), Infrastructure and Public Facilities (15), Natural Hazards (two), and Land Use (eight).

Unfortunately, the latest incarnation of the Maui Island Plan remains "very aspirational," and many concerns we shared earlier persist in this version, including misgivings about how this document may impact economic development.

In the Population section, policy recommendations — including recommendations to limit growth in terms of capping the visitor population, and restricting resort locations to Wailea, Makena, Kapalua and Kaanapali — appear harmful to the visitor industry. We long have challenged such language but were surprised to see this language again, especially in light of all that is happening in our community today. This is just one example. A more comprehensive economic view is needed, especially since this plan will help set our direction and growth for the next 20 years.

We realize the County Council will review the Maui Island Plan, but the process may take a long time and many revisions before it is adopted. We need strategic and sustainable economic development plans now to set a course for recovery and a vibrant economic future, with clear direction and actions.

Proactive policies are needed to make our existing small businesses and industries stronger; maximize what exists

and works; leverage opportunities; identify and pursue quick wins; reduce burdensome regulation; attract investment; educate our work force; and draw new industries that build on our strengths and complement the community's vision.

It is time we stop dickered with legislation that hurts businesses and hampers growth, and start to concentrate on our economic future. This should be our priority right now, not frivolous legislation that diverts attention from that focus.

As we enter an even tougher budget year on both the county and state levels, there will be movement to raise taxes to cover deficits, further hitting businesses that already are besieged with challenges. Therefore, we call upon our elected officials to lead our county and state in the direction of economic recovery.

Join us in asking elected officials what specifically they are doing to support the business sector and to boost our economy, and ask them to introduce legislation that helps.

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