

The Maui News

Affordable housing key to West Maui transportation woes

Testifiers think that if people can live where they work, congestion will ease



Around 100 community members listen to presentations Tuesday evening at the West Maui Senior Center. Hosted by the county Planning Department, the meeting focused on transportation issues as part of the West Maui Community Plan update. The Maui News / COLLEEN UECHI photos

LAHAINA — Some West Maui residents believe they have a solution to the nagging issue of traffic jams on Honoapiilani Highway, and it doesn't have to do with the Lahaina bypass.

"The one thing you can do to get people out of their cars is to make them be able to live where they work," Napili resident Amy Stephens told a crowd of around 100 at the West Maui Senior Center Tuesday night. *"It's a simple equation. People need to live close (to work)."*

Curbing luxury development and investing in affordable housing were on the minds of many residents as they mulled transportation solutions Tuesday. Hosted by the county Planning Department, the meeting was part of the West Maui Community Plan update process, which kicked off earlier this year. Among the biggest issues plaguing West Maui is traffic.

Just about everyone has a horror story — Lahaina residents stuck in Kahului during fires; truckers who slept in their vehicles when accidents shut down the road; and visitors who've missed flights because the traffic was so bad.

"Transportation definitely is No. 1," Lahaina resident Rose Crichton said before the meeting. *"I feel that we're already at max capacity, so that is our No. 1 issue. And, of course, the type of development they plan on doing in the near future."*



Ford Fuchigami

Lauren Armstrong, executive director of the Maui Metropolitan Planning Organization, explained just how many vehicles traverse Honoapiilani Highway. Last year on an average day, about 25,000 vehicles drove across the pali in both directions. Near Lahaina, that number was close to 30,000, and in Kaanapali, it surpassed 40,000. According to the community plan, about 8,000 cars a day are commuters driving in or out of West Maui for work, Armstrong said.

“When we consider that there are 20,000 registered rental cars on Maui, we can imagine that a lot of traffic is also made up of visitors,” she said.

Lisa Paulson, executive director of the Maui Hotel & Lodging Association, said there were 740,434 car rentals in 2016 — which is not the number of rental cars, but the number of times people rented cars.

The county bus commuter service for west side employees averages 450 employee rides a day, Paulson added.

With that in mind, residents voiced their suggestions to state and county transportation officials. Several people thought more car rental and maintenance facilities should be placed in Lahaina. Others asked for a direct bus route from the Kahului Airport to West Maui.



Ed Sniffen

And, while the Planning Department emphasized a focus on transportation, many believed the traffic solution came down to development — limiting condominiums and resorts and focusing on housing.

“To get cars off the road, let’s have true affordable housing to where you and me can actually buy a home,” Lahaina resident Jeremy Delos Reyes said. *“That’s one less car going over the pali if people can live and work on the west side.”*

Ford Fuchigami, director of the state Department of Transportation, said the department has been putting most of its

highway resources toward preservation of existing roadways to avoid losing a pipeline of federal funding that's been building up over the years.

Reducing the pipeline opens the door to more funding, which the Lahaina bypass sorely needs.

Ed Sniffen, Highways Division deputy director, said the bypass' next phase, from Keawe Street to the Kaanapali connector, will cost "about \$60 million that we just don't have right now." However, the design is moving forward so that when the funding comes, the project is ready. The phase under construction now, a two-lane stretch of highway between Hokiokio Place and Olowalu, is expected to be finished by March 2018. By February, the department wants to start putting traffic on the bypass.

"Really what this design does is it puts everybody on the bypass, which is a lot more efficient because you're away from the shoreline now," Sniffen said. He added that "that whole portion of the lower road will stay intact. . . . All we're doing is moving the volume to the upper road to make sure when you get to the lower road, you can slow down."

Meanwhile, Paulson said newer hotel properties also have to commit to being part of the county's traffic plan. For example, the owners of the Westin Ka'anapali Ocean Resort and Westin Nanea Ocean Villas have agreed to offer travel allowances — such as subsidized monthly bus passes — for employees to use other modes of transportation. The resort is also considering a carpool program for workers and offers guest shuttles that carried more than 300,000 riders last year.

As for the buses, county Transportation Director Don Medeiros said he thought that "we need to maximize the current system that we have — which currently serves the airport — before we look to develop something new and different." That could include reducing bus stop wait times. He added that because the bus system gets federal funding, it can't compete with the private sector, which is what a nonstop route from the airport would do to charter bus and taxi services. But Medeiros pointed out that with three stops, the Lahaina route has some of the fewest stops in the system.

The discussion on how that all fits into the community plan is just beginning. For now, the county will continue to hold public meetings and workshops. Next up is a community design open house from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sept. 30 at the West Maui Senior Center.

For more information, visit wearemaui.org.

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