

Kamilo Nui farmers hope to stave off development



DEBORAH BOOKER | The Honolulu Advertiser

Richard Nii runs a nursery in Kamilo Nui Valley and is worried about development coming to the last agricultural valley in the Hawai'i Kai

area. Stanford Carr Development has entered into a deal with land-owner Kamehameha Schools to purchase and develop the 87 acres.

HAWAI'I KAI — Rows of vivid red and pink poinsettias fill the entrance to Dean Takebayashi's farm in Kamilo Nui Valley.

Likewise, up the street rows of blossoming roses of all colors greet visitors at R&S Nii Nursery, roosters and chickens roam freely, pecking at the dirt.

This piece of country living is wedged in the back of suburbia and has been here for decades. Every day, customers ask if the farmers will be here next year.

Takebayashi and the Nii family don't know how to answer that.

They'd like to continue farming in the quiet valley in Hawai'i Kai as they have for the past 40 years or so, but their landowner, Kamehameha Schools, wants to sell the land.

There's no value in holding on to the land in agriculture, particularly since the 14 farmers are paying slightly more than \$200 a year per acre in lease rent, the landowner has said. Their leases expire in 19 years.

Because Kamehameha Schools has entered into an agreement with local developer Stanford Carr Development, which has agreed to purchase the 87 acres and develop it, Kamehameha Schools is left waiting for Carr to make a move.

This is the last chunk of land that, until recently, residents thought would remain in agriculture and not be turned into homes.

Residents who want to see the land remain for farming have organized a meeting with the landowner, the community and

COMMUNITY MEETING

Residents who want land in Kamilo Nui Valley to continue to be used for farming, and those who want it to be sold to a developer, can attend a community meeting at 6 p.m. Thursday at the Haha'ione Elementary cafeteria.

the farmers for the second time in six months to discuss its plans for the land.

That meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Thursday at the Haha'ione Elementary School cafeteria.

In September, more than 100 people showed up at the community meeting to voice concerns.

Land use has become a murky issue, as half of the 14 farmers would like to stay and farm and the other half want to retire. The problem is that many of their leases begin renegotiating as early as next year, and banks do not like to make loans to prospective buyers with such unknowns as what the lease rent might be or whether the owner will demand the land back.

And without an agreement from the landowner to write a new lease, farmers don't know where to turn.

"If I stay," Takebayashi said, "I want to renegotiate the lease rent for something that is economically feasible. I'd like to stay and continue my business if the lease rent is reasonable. I can't do my business if it's not.

"It's not easy being a farmer." Kamehameha Schools has said that it won't negotiate with indi-

vidual owners, but only the Kamilonui Valley Farmers Cooperative, an organization formed when the farmers first moved to the valley as a way to fund road, sewer and water improvements more than three decades ago.

"There is nothing new from Kamehameha Schools perspective," said Kekoa Paulsen, the landowners' spokesman. "The proposal (from Stanford Carr) is still out there. Stanford Carr is the one to make the deal happen."

Residents say the valley plays a vital role in preserving Hawai'i Kai's ecosystem. It is a watershed, a green belt. Mostly, it's the last valley in Hawai'i Kai to remain free of homes.

"Once it's gone, it's gone forever," said Tai Hong, a member of the Livable Hawai'i Kai Hui, a group formed to preserve open space in the community. "The land is very valuable now, but we want to strike a balance between preservation and development."

The land lies outside the city's designated area for development. Being outside the urban growth boundary and being designated as agriculture land, should offer protection, but rezoning has happened before on farm land in Hawai'i Kai. More than 1,000 new homes have been added to the community during this recent spate of development and is not reflected in current census figures that show there are 27,657 people. That's a 0.8 percent increase from 1990 to 2000.

City Councilman Charles Djou, who will be at Thursday's meeting, said that he believes the land should remain agricultural and

not be developed. And while the community of farmers and residents have been discussing the future of the valley as if a proposal is before the city for a housing development, no plans have been submitted to the city for review, Djou said.

The process, should plans come forward, would take at least two years from re-zoning to the start of construction, he said.

"Kamilo Nui's future rests with the City Council," Djou said. "The zoning code is the law of the land and the law of the land says this parcel is designated as agriculture."

Those trying to keep the valley undeveloped and in agriculture believe they have to remain vigilant, despite Djou's promise of many public hearings. It happened before where a piece of agriculture land was carved out to make room for 65 homes built by Schuler Homes. That was nearly four years ago.

Richard Nii, who has spent his whole life farming, sees the area differently.

He sees it as home, the place where he was raised and where he has raised his children.

He has been in Kamilo Nui Valley since his dad's farm was moved from Mariner's Cove in the late 1960s to make room for a housing development. That was the family's second move because of a shift in land use.

"I've always known it would come to something like this," Nii said. "We want to continue farming. Many of our customers ask us if we're going to move or stay."

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