

Kamilo Nui Farmers: Determination, Diligence and Dedication

October 19, 2011
By Midweek Staff



Elizabeth Reilly

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The plight of the Kamilo Nui Valley farmers has taken a turn for the better, at least for the next 15 years. For those who may not remember, these farmers together with the East Honolulu community drew a line in the sand seven years ago when a developer and longtime ag advocate with ties to the valley approached Kamehameha Schools and pitched paving over the last undeveloped valley in Hawaii Kai which also happens to be the area's last piece of agricultural land.

Despite these ag lands being outside the urban growth boundary and wellacknowledged in the East Honolulu Sustainable Communities Plan as a community resource, some eyed these 87 acres as a cash cow because of the 96825 zip code. A believer in "highest and best use" of land being residential development, this newly formed development posse worked toward convincing the farmers to sell their leases and step aside. This

divide-and-conquer tactic nearly collapsed the 30plus year relationships built among these farmers. Valley neighbors no longer knew who to trust, nor did they speak to one another.

Knowing all the farmers had leases that expire in 2025, each one still feared the looming lease-rent negotiations, which arrived in July of 2010. Would the new lease rent drive them out of business and out of the valley? It almost did as detailed in the Aug. 2, 2010, newspaper headline "Hawaii Kai farmers face 25-fold rent hike."

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So, what happened? The past 365 days have been amazing! The farmers organized, found common ground and a collective voice, and formed Kamilo Nui Farmers Alliance. The purpose and intent was to pool financial and intellectual resources so to better prepare to protect what they value and desperately needed: the land at a fair lease rent. They educated themselves, conducted regular meetings, hired a consultant, met with elected officials, completed an ag study, completed an appraisal, hired an attorney, strategized and vowed to hold on strong to one another while they rode the infamous Cyclone (Coney Island roller coaster).

On the third ride around the track, the diligent farmers recognized that their fate was truly in their own hands and that no study, attorney or consultant could do a better job of representing them than they could do themselves, at least at this crucial point in time. So they did just that they did the talking and represented themselves. They carpoled and sat in corporate Goliath's board room and talked. They hosted meetings between farmers and Kamehameha Schools' Land Asset Management Division in the valley's board room the picnic table at R & S Nii

Nursery. And they talked strong compelling arguments, talked historic facts, talked ag business and talked community. The determined farmers took charge of their own destiny and used their own words to encourage Kamehameha Schools to work with them.

I am happy to report that the alliance struck a deal and leases were signed. It's not perfect, but it's their deal, not a 25-fold rent hike but a lease rent that was developed collaboratively with Kamehameha Schools to help sustain and also challenge them for the next 14 years. Details of the "art of the deal" need not be publicized to know our farmers "done good," as this more digestible deal will now be made available to all Maunaloa farmers who had previously signed higher lease rents, and it includes the farm lots behind Kaiser High School. Trump would be proud!

What carried the farmers over the past six years? Community and the powerful role people play in how communities take shape and what we do to protect what we value such as our neighboring farmers and the 87-acre valley which serves as "our little bit of country."

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Looking forward, we can continue to count on finding Toyama bananas, Enomoto veggies and Nii plants at our favorite farmers markets and in Kamilonui Valley. We also can anticipate changes, such as a shift to grow more food, implementation of conservation ag practices, community educational events, a mini facelift for "the country road" and interesting partnerships such as Livable Hawaii Kai Hui and Chrysanthemums of Hawaii working together to rebuild their nursery and launch a new movement, Aloha Aina O Kamilo Nui.

To learn more about the valley and participate in some fun volunteering efforts, email me at hawaiikaihui@aol.com.

Elizabeth Reilly is president and co-founder of Livable Hawaii Kai Hui, a nonprofit dedicated to sensible growth and development to enhance the quality of life for residents. She also is vice chairman of the Hawaii Kai Neighborhood Board and board member of Maunaloa Communities Foundation and the League of Women Voters.

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