

MLP seeks input on Honolua Bay options

BY SKY BARNHART

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HONOLUA – Faced with a growing tide of community concern over proposed plans to develop Honolua Bay and Lipoa Point, Maui Land & Pineapple Company Inc. (MLP) announced it is taking a step back and considering all options, including negotiating with Maui County for possible sale of the area.

To gather public input, the company is forming a “Native Hawaiian-led” community advisory panel, MLP spokeswoman Teri Freitas Gorman said on April 17. The panel will study and recommend a long-term preservation strategy for the gorgeous natural area surrounding the marine sanctuary and site of one of the world’s best surfing waves.

On Friday, April 20, hundreds of Maui residents and representatives of the Save Honolua Coalition testified at Council Chambers in support of a new resolution urging the county to acquire Honolua Bay land.

West Maui Councilwoman Jo Anne Johnson introduced the resolution, which states that the area “holds great cultural, environmental, archaeological, and recreational value and should be preserved,” and asks the administration to pursue negotiations with MLP.

According to Gorman, MLP has tried in the past to sell the area to federal, state and county government in the effort to turn it into a public park.

“It’s not so much the purchase of the land – obviously as a publicly traded company, for our shareholders, we would have to get fair value for that land – but the maintenance of the area that’s the concern,” she said.

“It’s not an inexpensive undertaking to maintain an area of that size and ecological frailty. It’s not going to be your usual Maui County park-type operation.”

In January 2007, MLP submitted to the General Plan Advisory Committee a conceptual long-term plan for the Lipoa Point area, which totals 583.4 acres, including some of the Honolua Bay area, Windmills Beach, and lands formerly and currently in pineapple cultivation. MLP’s plan proposes 40 homesites mauka of Honoapiilani Highway, an 18-hole links-style golf course, a surf park and a cultural park.

“Our first and foremost goal is to protect the bay environmentally,” Gorman said. “If the community can come up with a better plan, we are certainly going to consider that recommendation.”

However, doing nothing will not be a consideration, she said.

“We wish we could [leave it the way it is], but it’s simply not possible. The company has been allowing people to access Honolua Bay over our lands seems like forever now. At one time it was a perfectly manageable situation, when the traffic and environmental impact was light. As the population and tourism continues to grow, traffic to the area continues to increase? that access [road] up and down the bluff is disturbing the soil and increasing runoff into the bay. Our feeling is that more controlled access to the bay is what is required to improve the environmental impact.”

Residents of the area have not been so sure that MLP’s vision agrees with their own.

“We really don’t want a golf course and 40 luxury homes; we’re looking for something to benefit the entire community,” said Elle Cochran, president of the Save Honolua Coalition, which was formed this year to ensure preservation of the bay.

Elle and her husband, Wayno, a 35-year Honolua resident and surfer, are joined on the Save Honolua board by Tamara Paltin, Kathy Corcoran, Shawn Reid, Doug Pitzer, John Carty, Nikki Stange, Kanoa Nishiki, and Wayne Nishiki.

“We are everyday people who really care about the area,” Elle said. “We want to express to the public that we all need to get involved in the planning process.”

Last month, Save Honolua began circulating a petition asking Maui County to acquire the coastal property at Lipoa Point “by negotiation, or if necessary, by eminent domain.” The group presented 1,600 signatures to council members at the March 29 Budget and Finance Committee meeting.

MLP owns close to 25,000 acres on Maui, including Kapalua Resort and approximately 6,000 acres of pineapple. In order to assess public feeling about Honolua, MLP Development Coordinator Kalani Schmidt has been conducting “informal” sessions with community members for the past 18 months. It was this initial input from bay users that formed the current conceptual plans.

Gorman said. “Once these plans were announced, it was clear that people misunderstood them. So we felt it was time to open up the process a little bit wider? [do] something a little bit more formal.”

There is no question that the wave itself must be protected. Thousands of surfers come every year for a glimpse and if they’re lucky, a ride, at the famed right point break.

In meeting with surfers, Schmidt said they have determined certain changes that could be made to protect the surf spot without sacrificing the area’s integrity. These “improvements” would include slightly widening and extending the access road, paving it with a light-colored surface so as not to burn surfers’ feet, changing the slope so runoff would be captured in the grasses instead of eroding the cliff, and possibly adding showers, composting toilets and trash cans. The footpath leading down to the bay would remain the same, she said.

“Back in the old days, there used to be coconut trees [at the end of the point], and people would

hang out all day,” Schmidt said. “We’re putting that back, with coconut trees and some grassy area, some space to wax your board.”

According to Schmidt, MLP is in the process of doing all of the background studies to create an Environmental Impact Statement that will be available to the public. “We’re looking at water quality, archaeology, floral, fauna, etc.? As far as the archeological sites, we’ve done a complete inventory survey and submitted that to the State Historic Preservation Division for review [in 2006], and that’s actually been approved.”

Gorman has been frustrated by public “misinformation” about MLP’s plans, such as the idea that Lipoa Point and Honolua Bay are in “their native virgin state.”

“That simply isn’t true. This was an area of great activity when Honolua Ranch had a ramp [for cattle] out there and homes in the valley,” she said. In 1926, Maui’s first golf course opened on Lipoa Point and remained in operation until it was turned into a landing field for military aircraft during World War II.

MLP proposed a golf course for Lipoa Point because “we wanted to address the issue of runoff and open space,” Gorman said. “It will not be a private course, and the idea is to manage the course as naturally as possible?Obviously, there are other things we could do with this land that would generate more profit for the company.”

Coral Reef Alliance field representative Liz Foote has been looking at impacts to Honolua’s reef for some time now, and working through Project S.E.A.-Link to promote community involvement in stewardship efforts, volunteer programs, and visitor outreach and education.

“Increased sedimentation and stormwater runoff are concerns with any coastal development,” Foote said. “I would really like to see a positive and productive dialogue involving all community stakeholders concerning the future of Honolua Bay. It’s important for people to focus on gathering accurate information in order to make informed decisions.”

Saving the bay is a goal that many groups seem to have in common – it’s just a matter of how best to accomplish it.

“It’s not like an ‘us and them’ situation,” Cochran said. “It’s all of the community involved. We want to get input to get an overall concrete vision of the area.”

“At this stage, we’re open to all considerations,” Gorman said. “The company doesn’t have any preconceived ideas about anything. Our first and foremost goal is to care for the bay.

From the very beginning, we called them ‘proposed conceptual plans,’ which is very far away from a done deal.”

For more information about MLP’s proposed plans, or to apply to the MLP advisory panel, visit www.malamahonolua.com.

The Save Honolua Coalition meets every Tuesday from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the King Kamehameha III Elementary School Cafeteria at 611 Front St. in Lahaina. For more information, visit www.savehonolua.org.

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