



Bills Poised To Take Away Environmental Review

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Windward residents deserve much credit for working hard to protect what makes our part of the island so special. The planning and zoning guidelines crafted by our communities to protect environmental and cultural resources have been crucial to maintaining our side's unique character.

Hawaii also has benefitted environmentally, culturally and economically from the environmental review and permitting processes enacted by the State Legislature in 1975 and 1979. By reviewing public projects prior to their approval, any problematic or concerning aspects can be identified and addressed ahead of time.

In addition to protecting valuable resources, this saves time and money by avoiding costs that might otherwise be incurred through unanticipated design adjustments, potential lawsuits and subsequent project delays. County planning and zoning ensures that development is tailored to reflect and protect the desires and resources particular to each community.

Unfortunately, a number of bills to remove these protections are moving rapidly through the Legislature. The most recent one to undo these protections is Senate Bill 775 (SB755), recently amended with language encompassing content from several different bills. SB755 now contains a laundry list of exemptions and automatic approvals that essentially remove state projects from environmental review and permitting requirements. SB755 also specifically states that "consistency of a state project with a county general plan and zoning shall not be required." This means that community-specific zoning can be completely ignored. Rather than encouraging economic development as the bill title states, this bill spells out economic risk, places our environmental and cultural resources in jeopardy, and threatens the integrity of our small-town charm. Which leads us to SB2927.

SB2927 compounds matters by exempting development projects near rail and bus hubs from county zoning and planning. For our Windward communities this could enable new bus transit stations or centers to be built and receive zoning and other exemptions.

Other bills which would remove projects from oversight and permitting – and that continue to move through the legislative process – include HB2154, HB2611, HB2613, SB2235, SB2873 and SB3010.

Fortunately, the Hawaii state capitol has one of the best Public Access Rooms (PAR) in the nation. Its expert staff is there to help you understand the process. They also provide resources and facilities so you can track legislation and submit testimony. The access room is located in Room 401 and can be reached at 587-0478, par@capitol.hawaii.gov, or hawaii.gov/lrb/par.

Since these measures are moving in the Legislature, please consider expressing your views. Go to capitol.hawaii.gov or consult with PAR. Remember, your voice truly matters!