

'A Vision for Punalu'u': Black Sand Beach Developer Vows Community-Led Project for Neglected Area

By [Tom Hasslinger](#)

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The developer behind a plan to revitalize neglected areas around Punalu'u in Ka'u has pledged to restore the dilapidated structures currently there before constructing anything new.

Norman Quon, project director for the Punalu'u, said that the property owner, Eva Liu, is committed to working with the community in shaping the plans to reinvigorate 434 acres around the area known as Black Sand Beach on the southern end of the island.

Liu's pledge comes after three community meetings were held at the beginning of December where residents and developers for Liu's company, Black Sand Beach, LLC, discussed concerns and ideas on how to put the best plan forward.

"We have been reaching out to the broader Ka'u community seeking a collaborative effort to develop a vision for Punalu'u," Quon told Big Island Now. "Initial conceptual plans are still in the early stages of formulation. As further discussions with the community take place, we will have better clarity on what are the next steps and when things can move forward."

Before the town hall meetings on Dec. 8, Dec. 10 and Dec. 11 in Nā'ālehu and Pāhala, Black Sand Beach, LLC withdrew a special management area use permit application with the County of Hawai'i in order to collaborate with the community more before proceeding. The withdrawn application asked for permission to do a number of repair and maintenance projects on structures already on the property, but also to construct a welcome center on 9 acres of the property, as well as clear half an acre to make room for a 7-day-a-week open market venue. The welcome center project was estimated to cost \$486,000.

Punaluu Black Sand Beach, Hawaii. [#WorldPhotos pic.twitter.com/hSV52W7Bzx](https://www.twitter.com/hSV52W7Bzx)

— Amazing Pictures (@OurWorldPhotos) [September 10, 2014](#)

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Quon said one priority that came out of the meetings was to improve what's already there before building anything new.

“As expressed by many in the community, first start to fix what has been severely neglected over many decades as we start to talk about the future,” he said.

Those neglected structures include roads, water and wastewater systems, the 18-hole golf course and clubhouse, shuttered since the 2018 Kīlauea eruptions, tennis courts, the Punalu'u restaurant complex, shut since the 1980s, and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies building, which is used but not very well maintained, among other improvements.

Quon said Black Sand Beach, LLC hopes to secure immediately the necessary county approvals to allow for the repair and maintenance of those existing infrastructures and facilities.

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While the initial work on the project will focus on clean-up and repair, the company is expecting to file for a special management area major permit during the first half of 2022 to include the new project components, he added.

The welcome center would be a big part of the new components. It's description, proposed to go up on the makai side of the parcel as outlined in the map at the top of this story, included a 675-square-foot, one-story retail space adjacent the existing tennis courts in the previous SMA permit application. It also consisted of an open-air seating area, restored tennis courts, a swimming pool, open amphitheater with grass seating and a movie screen, and more.

All projects, will need to be done with respect toward the ecological area, the developer said. No zoning changes would be required.

"Discussions with the community need to take place to formulate a land management plan for the Punalu'u coastline to educate the community and visitors, maintain and care for the property, encourage and protect the habitats of the wildlife, both flora and fauna, of the coastline, and protect the cultural resources on the site," Quon said.

The Hawai'i Wildlife Fund was one stakeholder who opposed the new construction prior to the public meetings.

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HWF President and Program Director Megan Lamson, executive director and co-founder Hannah Bernard, conservation specialist Jodie Rosam, and cultural resource specialist Nohealani Ka'awa sent a letter to the county that the construction proposed within 200 feet of the shoreline violates setback guidelines established there, and further study needs to be done before moving forward.

"We respect that the applicant has invested the time to connect with those who have kuleana to the area," the letter said. "However, we emphasize that in order to proceed with this SMAA request, new current shoreline and vegetation surveys should be

conducted before concluding that there are indeed no impacts to our native wildlife and habitats,” the letter read.

Lamson said this week that the nonprofit organization’s views hadn’t changed in light of the public meetings.

“We are not anti-development, we just want to be sure that the proper shoreline and vegetation surveys are conducted and environmental impacts assessed before proceeding, and we actually commended Eva for her expressed desire to work with the community in her efforts,” she said.

Zendo Kern, County of Hawai‘i planning director, said the county had received some concerns from community members about the project not involving the community enough prior to the developer scheduling the public meetings.

He urged residents to continue to watch for announcements for any additional public meetings the landowner may host, but that members of the public can email planning@hawaiicounty.gov if they would like to receive a copy of the resubmitted application once it is submitted, or if they have any other questions.

Quon said community involvement has proven beneficial to the shape of the project, and will continue to be a cornerstone as the plan moves forward.

“The general take-away from our meetings is that the Ka‘ū community does recognize Punalu‘u as an opportunity that could benefit the broader community in many ways,” he said. “But only if done properly and with proper respect to the culture and history that defines this place and with special emphasize on the opportunities sought by Ka‘ū residents rather than a focus on the opportunities provided by tourism.”

Tom Hasslinger

Tom Hasslinger is a journalist who lives in Kailua-Kona. Prior to joining Big Island Now, he worked as the managing editor for West Hawaii Today and deputy editor for The Garden Island newspaper on Kauai. He’s worked for over 15 years as a reporter for the

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